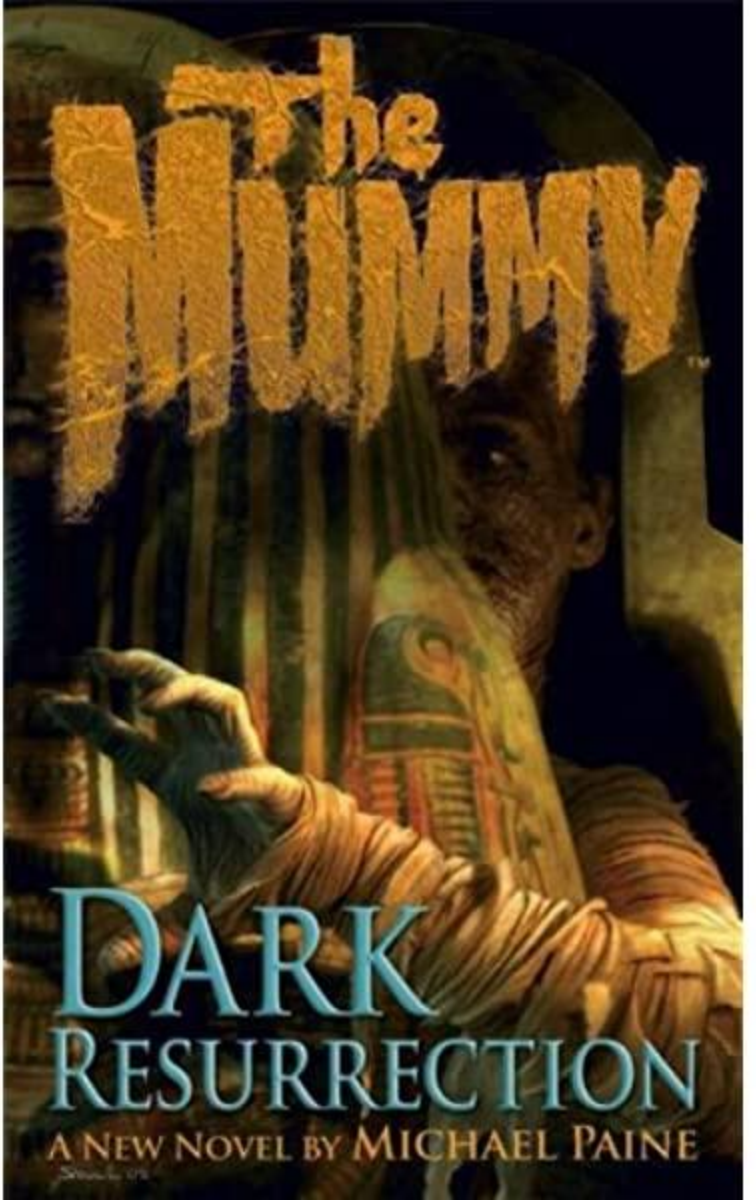
the MUMMY™
DARK RESURRECTION
A NEW NOVEL BY MICHAEL PAINE

Death feeds life tenfold.
The dead foster the living unto eternity.
The dead create life ten times ten.

—*The Book of Anubis*

PROLOGUE

The Brandts had known their share of madness and sorrow, and most of them expected that they would know more. The one optimist among them was Josh Brandt who, at thirty years old, was young enough not to have learned better. He was not consistently cheerful, not exactly, but the family's history was mostly just history to him, nothing more.

Their family estate, one hundred fifty acres of it, was in the northern suburbs of Pittsburgh, in a place called Fox Chapel. The centerpiece was a sprawling Gothic Revival mansion, the kind of place crazy steel barons built for their crazy wives or mistresses in the crazy 1890s, when money—for them—was inexhaustible. The mansion had lancet windows, vaulted ceilings, even gargoyles. But there was no discernible plan or symmetry. It rambled in every direction, covering everything in its path, like a flood.

Great Grandpa Jeremiah Brandt had not been one of Pittsburgh's original steel tycoons. That came later. He made his initial fortune in more shadowy ways. Then, opportunistically American as he was, he bought the place from a family that had been even richer but had seen their fortune vanish due to too much alcohol and even more morphine. Since the 1920s the mansion had been the Brandt place.

It was, in its aimless, ambling, opulent way, quite the showplace. There were parties and even formal balls. The smart set, or what passed for it in Pittsburgh, were there all the time for this social function or that. Politicians, the heads

of nonprofits, clergymen, all the usual social parasites haunted the place like persistent ghosts. And everyone cooed at the architecture, which was garish and obvious but impressive, in its overdone way. And the house, which would normally have been gloomy, was illuminated with scores of authentic Tiffany lamps, providing not only light but much-needed color to the place.

But there was one part of the mansion visitors never saw—the hospital wing. It was there that members of the family too old, too infirm, or too otherwise inappropriate for society were housed. There were no stained-glass lamps there; the light came from dim wall-sconces that seemed to add to the house's natural gloom instead of dispelling it. The carpeting was old and rather worn instead of thick and plush. The furniture, too, had seen better days, hand-me-down stuff moved in from the rest of the mansion as newer pieces were bought.

And it was there that Josh Brandt headed early one morning, just before sunrise, feeling good about the world, whistling a sweet tune.

Tom Bowers, the security chief, snapped to attention as he approached. "Morning, Mr. Brandt."

"Good morning, Tom. How's everything?"

"Quiet as usual, sir."

"Good. I'm going to visit Miss Stephanie and then Mrs. Brandt. Remind me when it's ten o'clock, will you? I have a plane to catch."

"Yes, sir."

Just beyond the security post was the office suite for the medical staff. A nurse was always there, and doctors were on call and could be there quickly if they were needed. Josh stepped inside the med suite and looked around; there was no sign of the nurse. He assumed he'd run into her.

One door in the wing was kept locked. It was thicker and heavier than the others, and the window in it was covered

with a steel grille. Normally, the nurse would have opened it for him. He gestured to Tom, who came with his keys and unlocked it.

Inside, a young woman, blond and wispily thin, stood looking out the window at the estate. Josh hoped she was herself; as many times as she had been someone else, he never quite got used to it.

Stephanie had been diagnosed with multiple personality disorder when she was still a child. At times she was a cold, humorless lesbian named Alice. At other times she became a small boy called Robin, who cried all the time. And there were others. So he never knew precisely who he would find when he came to visit her. It was unsettling, and it could be terribly difficult. But he loved her.

He pulled the door loudly shut behind him, and it jolted her out of whatever daydream she was having.

"Josh!" Yes, she was Stephanie this morning.

"Hi, Steph." He crossed the room and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "How are you today?"

"Okay, I guess. I haven't lost a lot of time today."

"Good. It's a pretty day, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Too pretty for you to be here."

He gestured to a pair of chairs. "Let's sit and talk for a while, okay?"

A pair of matching, faded brocade chairs sat in front of a second window. Josh positioned them so they could watch the rising sun. The sky in the east was the most vibrant red-orange he had ever seen. But Stephanie watched her brother, not the sky.

She focused on him. "You're going away."

What Stephanie knew, and more to the point how she knew it, was always a source of astonishment to him. He made himself smile. "Can you tell me how you guessed that?"

"I didn't guess. Roger told me."

Roger: one of her other personalities. "And how does Roger know?"

"Do you want me to go away and let him come out, so you can ask him?"

"No!" He said it rather too forcefully, then made himself calm down. "No. I'll take your word for it. What did he say?"

She shrugged, then pointed outside. "Look, there's a cardinal. Look how red it is."

"Steph, what did Roger tell you?"

"Only that you're going away, and that when you come back everyone will be sad."

"That's all?"

"Yes. It's enough, Josh. He didn't say how long your trip would last, though. You'll come home soon, won't you?"

Josh nodded. "Grandma Violet's birthday party is next week. You know I wouldn't miss that."

"She'll be five thousand years old."

"No, only ninety, but—"

"I'm three thousand. Roger wouldn't tell me where you're going. He said I wouldn't like it."

Odd comment. Why would she care? "I'm going to Egypt for a few days, Steph."

"Egypt?" Her face went blank. But her voice took on an edge of panic. "Egypt?! No, Josh, you can't go there!"

He jumped up, crossed to her, and put a hand on her shoulder, hoping it would calm her. "It'll be okay. Really, Steph. I'm just going to—"

"He's there. You can't go."

"He? Who?"

"Imhotep. You'll bring him home with you. Whether you want to or not."

Ah, so that was it. A name she remembered from their childhood, a boogeyman. "There is no Imhotep, Steph. They never found him, remember?"

"They did. He's there. Waiting. For you and for me."

"That's silly, Steph." He wished the nurse would come. Stephanie was getting more and more worked up, and he was feeling less and less competent to deal with her. "Even if they found him, he's dead. He's been dead more than three thousand years."

"He'll hurt us! Don't go there!" She shrieked it.

The door flew open and the nurse came in with a hypo.

"Mrs. Davison. You heard?" Josh stepped aside for her.

"Try and hold her still, Mr. Brandt, while I administer this."

Stephanie fought, struggling wildly. Josh held her shoulders. On her third try, the nurse managed to make the injection. She and Josh stepped back and watched, hoping it would take effect quickly.

Stephanie's eyes widened. An evil leer appeared on her lips. And she began talking in a strange language. Her tone and manner suggested she was giving him a warning, but it was incomprehensible. She babbled, she screamed, and not a word of it made any sense.

After a few moments the sedative kicked in; she relaxed, went limp, then drifted quietly to sleep. Josh felt himself relaxing. He looked at the nurse. "I wish the doctors could do something. As many times as I've heard that, it still freaks me out."

Mrs. Davison was plump and middle-aged. But the struggle with Stephanie seemed to have taken less out of her than it did Josh. "I think one of her personalities uses it, a made-up language. You knew they do that, sometimes. The doctors have told you."

"Made up? The doctors say they don't know what to make of it."

The nurse shrugged. "I know what you mean about never getting used to it. To hear someone talking to you, to know they're trying to communicate, and not to be able to make any sense of it . . . It doesn't sound like any language I've ever heard."

"No." He lifted his sister and placed her carefully in her bed. "No, I guess not. Thank you for getting here so quickly."

"When I hear her raise her voice like that . . . I always know . . ."

"Yes. I'm sure you do." She was a good nurse. Josh wondered what they were paying her and decided she merited a raise. He'd take care of it when he got back. "I . . . listen, I want to visit Mrs. Brandt, too, this morning. Is she awake?"

Mrs. Davison nodded. "I was just with her. And she's in a cranky mood. I'd be careful."

"Look at that gorgeous day. What's wrong with everyone?"

She shrugged. "Let me just straighten up in here. You don't mind going alone?"

"Of course not. And don't worry. She and I understand each other."

He left her to rearrange the things that had got knocked about during the struggle. And he took one last glance at Stephanie. She was sleeping like an angel, it seemed; there was actually a smile on her lips. She was the most beautiful of the Brandts, a family known for their beauty. You'd never know, just looking at her, the turmoil inside.

The corridor was empty. Josh made a mental note—not for the first time—to have more lights put in. There was no reason for the wing to look so sad and vacant; it couldn't be good for the ones who lived there. He found himself wondering why Grandmother Violet had never demanded it. She could be . . . difficult when there was something she didn't like.

Violet Brandt was in the last suite of rooms, at the far end of the hall. In her far-off youth she had been tall, aristocratic,

and beautiful; now, her beauty had been replaced by too much makeup. She was a niece of Andrew Carnegie himself, the steel baron of steel barons, which is to say she was royalty, or as close as you could get to it in Pittsburgh. Her family had not approved of her marrying into a family of vulgar social climbers; but when the Brandt family fortune swelled to enormous sums, they came around.

Josh knocked softly at her door. She didn't answer. After knocking again, he opened the door quietly.

There was no sign of her in the living room of her suite. He went to the bedroom door and knocked; and again there was no answer. He opened it and went in. Violet was sitting up in her king-size bed, holding a cup and saucer in one hand and a teaspoon in the other. She didn't notice his entrance, or chose not to acknowledge it.

He smiled. Other than Stephanie, Violet was the only member of his family he was close to. She was a difficult old woman, but she had earned the right to be. And the two of them understood each other. With more than a little amusement, he said, "You stir your tea the way Macbeth's witches stirred their cauldron."

She did not look up. "Joshua."

"Good morning, Grandmother Violet."

He crossed to her and bent down to kiss her cheek, and she smiled serenely, knowing this kind of attention was her due. "You might knock before you enter a lady's bedroom." She pushed her teaspoon into his hand. "From what I hear, you've been in enough of them to know that."

"Nurse Davison has been gossiping again." There went her raise.

"She knows everything that goes on in this house. Why she cares is beyond me." She tasted her tea and made a sour face.

"I did knock. Besides, if the family gossip is right, you're not much of a lady."

She glared at him. "If you're looking for someone to banter with, Joshua, go and inflict yourself on your mother."

Violet and Claudia, Josh's mother, had never liked one another and, as the years passed, made less and less effort to pretend they did. But then, no one liked Claudia, not even her children. And, for her part, she never seemed to like anyone, either. She drank too much; Josh tried to tell himself it was the alcohol that made her so disagreeable, but when she was on a rampage, which she frequently was, that hardly seemed like enough of an excuse.

Josh forced himself to smile. "You're in your bitchy mode this morning."

"I most certainly am not. I have no such 'mode.'"

"You do, and I like it. It's like meeting one of those monstrous women in Gore Vidal's novels." He pulled a chair to her bedside.

"Don't be rude, Joshua. No one invited you to sit."

"I invited myself. This is my house, remember?"

She took a long, almost aggressive drink of her tea, as if downing it would put him in his place. "It is *our* house."

"Point taken."

"You've been upsetting your sister again."

"She keeps getting . . . I never know what to expect when I visit her." He put his hand on top of hers. To his surprise, she let him keep it there. "Or you, Grandmother."

"There isn't much point trying to sweet-talk me. Even at my age, I crave the attention of handsome young men. But I draw the line at grandchildren."

Josh laughed. "You're in good form today."

"The least form I am ever in, Joshua, is magnificent."

"Touché. I just wanted to say goodbye, Grandmother. I'm leaving on a short trip."

"So you won't be here to annoy me every morning?"

"I'll hire a temp to come and do it."

She snorted and drank more tea. "Mrs. Davison says you're going to spring a surprise party on me next week."

"Does that woman ever keep her mouth shut? But no, I guess I can't blame *her*. You pry. You threaten. You find out what you want to know. I don't think it's possible to surprise you."

"You're learning. Finally."

"But it is your ninetieth birthday, after all. A historic landmark."

"Like the Louisiana Purchase. I don't want a party."

"You'll soak up the attention like the vain, selfish old thing you are."

"It will only depress me. All those parasites. Relatives, legacy-seekers, all of them waiting for me to die."

"You're never going to let yourself die. It would please too many people."

She pulled her hand out from under his and slapped his knuckles, like a stern nanny. "Who are you inviting?"

"The usual crowd. Three isn't a lot of room for variety. We live in Pittsburgh, remember?"

"No clergy. I don't want them here, spouting clichés and platitudes, pretending to be interested in anything about me but my money."

Josh pretended to be shocked. "They are men of God."

"Hogwash. They're snake oil salesmen. In my day, we used to tar and feather the likes of them. If you won't spare me this party, at least promise me there won't be any clergy there."

"The bishop says he's looking forward to it."

"That's because he's expecting a lot of attractive young waiters. Joshua, promise me. I'm close enough to the grave to want a bit of peace. And that means no professional spreaders of superstition and gloom."

"I'll have to lie to him. If you lie to a bishop, you go to hell."

"Where do you think all the bishops go? And I don't want the mayor here, either. Coarse, vulgar little man."

"He's already bought a present."

"He should spend his money on better suits. And no one from city council, and for God's sake no one from Brandt Industries, and . . ."

"So your strategy is to have me uninvite everyone, till there's no party left."

"Old women are supposed to be transparent. It's in the job description. I don't want a party."

"There will be tents, music, lots of food . . . and the whole family, gathered around to honor you." He realized he'd dread an affair like that himself.

"By which you mean pretending to care about anything but how sick I am and when I'll die."

"Grandmother, stop it."

"Is your sister coming in for this . . . mess?"

"Louise? Of course." Louise was the oldest of the Brandt children. Twelve years older than Josh; she lived on the West Coast, with her husband.

"Good. I haven't seen her in far too long. And you know how your mother hates her. It will be so nice to have her here. But tell her not to bring those disagreeable children of hers, will you?"

"Tom and Theo? They're good kids."

"They're adolescent monsters and you know it. Worse than even you were at that age. Anyway, tell me about this trip of yours. Where are you going?"

He took a deep breath. "Egypt."

For the first time, Violet turned serious. "No. Josh, you mustn't."

"It's important to me."

"Are you meeting with some Middle Eastern oil barons, or something? Send middle management. Or have them come here."

"It's nothing like that."

"Josh." Her mood change was more and more dramatic. "Our family has had such a sad history with that place. You know. Please, don't go there."

"I'll be fine, Grandmother."

"You'll be the death of us all."

"It's only for a few days, after all. I wouldn't miss your party for the world."

"Wait—do you mean if you were to stay in Egypt long enough, you'd miss the party? Good. Take me with you, then."

"Stop it. You're going to lap up all the attention, and you know it."

"They're all parasites. Why don't you just cover me with lice or leeches?"

"Grandmother, stop it."

"Shall I show them the stents in my chest?"

"Please."

"No, on second thought, they'd all enjoy that too much."

He got to his feet and glared at her. "Now you listen to me. No one is waiting for you to die. Everyone loves you."

"Rubbish."

"Respects you, then."

"Tell them to respect me enough to leave me alone." Violet closed her eyes. For a long moment Josh thought something might be wrong. Then, just as he was about to ring for Nurse Davison, she opened them again. "You're the only one who loves me, Josh."

"That's not true."

"It is. And you're the only one I love. Out of all this huge family I've created—God help me—you're the best. You're the one."

He kissed her cheek again. "Thank you for saying so. But if you'd only give some of the others a chance to—"

"Please, Josh. Don't go to Egypt."

"I have to."

"That place . . . your father died there."

"Disappeared. And Grandfather too."

"Your grandfather ran off with that belly dancer."

"And left you with the family fortune. If that's really what happened, she wasn't much of a gold digger."

"Josh, he disappeared. With or without her, he disappeared. But your father died there." There were tears in the corners of her eyes.

"Disappeared. I won't die, I promise."

"And Stephanie—you know that her—her troubles began there."

"They did *not*." He said it emphatically. "I'll be back within a week. I haven't seen Egypt since we were kids, and I've always wanted to see it again, and now I have a reason to. So I'm going. You can't talk me out of it."

For a moment, Violet fell silent again. Then she looked out the window at the morning sky. "If you had any idea how much like your grandfather you sound . . . He used to say that same thing, in more or less the same words. He even got me to go with him once. Egypt seemed a kind of fairyland, a magical place. We sailed the Nile on a barge, like Antony and Cleopatra, and we saw all those wonderful places. And then . . . and then he never came home."

There was a tear at the corner of her eye. Seeing it upset Josh more than anything she had said. For the first time it dawned on him—really sank in—that, yes, the end was coming for her. He hoped when the time came, it would be peaceful. She deserved a gentle ending.

"I hear your sister at night, Josh. Sometimes I even go into her room to keep her company. No one deserves to be as sad as

she is. And it began when she was a child, in Egypt." She looked away from him. "At the very least, promise me you'll call your cousin Jim and let him guide you around."

"Jim's busy. He's the head of our Middle Eastern operations. He has more important things to do than play tour guide for me."

"More important than keeping you alive?"

"I promise you, I'll come home." He took her hand, and she squeezed his as if it was the only thing keeping her alive.

Tom Bowers knocked on the door, then stuck his head inside. "It's nearly ten. You asked me to remind you."

Josh glanced at his watch. "Thanks." He waited for Tom to leave, then turned back to his grandmother. "I have to get to the airport."

Violet looked away. "Are you telling your mother about this trip?"

"I am not."

"Good. She doesn't deserve to know about what you do."

He bent down to kiss her goodbye, but she pulled away. "You'll never see me alive again."

"You're not going to die."

"Not me, Joshua. You."

He rolled his eyes and pretended to look toward heaven. "Look, I promise you I'll be careful." He lunged at her and kissed her cheek. "There. Don't be a foolish old woman."

"Your father's exact words."

It was too exasperating. Josh arranged her pillows for her, moved the tea tray to the table beside her bed, kissed her goodbye again, and left.

If he'd known going to Egypt would upset everyone so, he would never have told them. He was grateful he'd had the sense not to tell them he was financing an archaeological dig there.

Family history . . . his grandfather, his father . . . now it was his turn.

He had to go.

CHAPTER 1

A sign declared "Valley of the Queens." The valley walls were steep, rocky, and stark. Every twenty yards yawned the entrance to a tomb; the interiors were quite dark. Here and there, tourists walked along gravel paths.

Josh shaded his eyes and peered around, trying to look like someone who knew about Egypt and would see all the significant things that were there to be seen. "Where is our dig?"

"Uh, no, I'm afraid we have a way to hike, yet." His guide and companion, Dr. Walter Siemens of the Western Pennsylvania University archaeology department, took him gently by the arm and steered him toward a little food stand not far from the entrance to the valley. "Here, let me buy you a soda."

"It's my money you're spending, remember?" Josh tried not to let it show that he was feeling a bit foolish.

"All the more reason, then."

Josh felt energetic and fit. He was dressed in what he thought would be appropriate clothing for excavating an ancient site. To his dismay, he heard one of the bellhops at the Winter Palace Hotel mutter that he looked like a character in an American movie. The word "American" was spoken with special distaste.

He had been in Egypt exactly six hours, long enough to get through customs at the Cairo airport, hop a commuter plane to Luxor, and check in at the Winter Palace. Siemens met him at the hotel, took him on the ferry across the Nile, and headed west, to the Theban Hills.

"This Jeep is rented in your name, Mr. Brandt. It'll be waiting on this side of the river whenever you need it." He parked near the entrance to the valley. "You have not been to Egypt before, I take it?"

"Not since I was a child. I came here once with my father. But I can't say I really remember anything. I recall there being a lot of big things here." He put on a wide, naïve smile. "And I remember the Valley of the Kings. I didn't know there was one for queens, too."

"The Theban hills are riddled with valleys and small gorges. The one where the kings are buried is the largest of them. But a great many tombs are scattered about the smaller ones. Some of them are pretty far afield." Siemens gestured at the food stand. "Do you like Coca-Cola? Everyone in Egypt drinks it. There are even food stands that call themselves 'the Temple of Coca-Cola.'"

Josh held up his canteen. "I'll stick to water, thanks."

Siemens ordered a bottle for himself, then turned back to Josh. "I wish you'd given us a bit of notice you were coming, Mr. Brandt."

"Call me Josh."

"Josh, then." He made himself smile. "It's not that we're not happy to see you; I hope you understand that. But we're getting close to the end of the digging season, and time is short."

"I promise I won't get in the way." Josh grinned back at him. "Honest."

"Ankh-es-en-Amun is the one important princess whose tomb has never been found."

"Yes, I know." Siemens was lecturing him like a schoolboy. Josh resented it but covered his frustration well.

"We're determined to find her before the end of the season."

"Of course. Dr. Siemens, I—"

"And we think we're on track to do it."

It was the first thing Siemens had said that caught Josh's interest. "You are? Really?"

A sly smile spread across the doctor's lips. "We wanted to surprise you. As you have surprised us." It was a slight dig, but Josh decided he didn't mind.

"Well, believe me, I'm surprised." He looped his arm though Siemens's and started to walk with him up the valley. "Where's the dig?"

"About half a mile up this path and over the hill. It's in a little side valley, which I imagine is why the tomb hasn't been found before this. Why don't you let me show you the way?"

Josh looked the man up and down. Siemens was in his fifties, maybe pushing sixty. Short, a tad plump, graying hair. And he was dressed . . . well, not at all the way Josh thought an archaeologist ought to be dressed—in jeans, a red T-shirt, and sandals. Not the way characters in American movies would dress. That was all he had to go by.

"Would you like to see some of the other tombs in the valley?" Siemens took a long swig of his Coke. "Some of them are quite lovely."

"I thought all the really impressive ones were in the Valley of the Kings."

Siemens pointed to an opening in the rock. "You'd especially like this one, I think. It's the only one in Egypt that's decorated in pastels."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Or that one over there." He pointed. "It's the tomb of Nefretiri."

"Who?"

"Have you ever seen *The Ten Commandments*, Mr. Brandt?"

Josh nodded. "Of course. It's one of those movies that no one can escape, like *The Wizard of Oz*."

"Well, Nefretiri is Anne Baxter."

"Oh." The information seemed to confuse him even more. "Well, maybe later, then. You're right, it sounds interesting. Anne Baxter. But I want to see our site first."

"Certainly."

They hiked up a fairly steep path. The archaeologist moved briskly; to his annoyance, Josh had to work to keep up.

"Did you have a good flight, Mr. Brandt?"

"Please, call me Josh." He shrugged. "It was a flight. What can you say? The stewardesses weren't very pretty."

"And did you have a chance to see much of Cairo?"

"No, not really. I did see the pyramids, off on the horizon, but that was about it. The rest will have to wait for another trip."

"You're planning on coming back?" There was the faintest trace of stiffness in his tone.

"Only when you find something."

"I see." They had reached the crest of the hill. Siemens stopped and rested his foot on a convenient rock. "You know, this arrangement is a bit unusual."

"How do you mean?"

Siemens seemed to decide he didn't want to rest after all. He began descending a path even steeper than the one they'd climbed; off-balance, Josh followed. "What did you mean by that, Dr. Siemens?"

Siemens got a pebble stuck in one of his sandals and stooped to knock it out against a rock. "Well, the days of millionaire patrons financing digs in Egypt . . . It's been a long time since that was the usual way of doing things."

"The university gave me to understand my backing was welcome."

"Oh, it is, it is. I'm only saying it's not the usual thing, these days. No, we couldn't be more happy to have the Brandt fortune behind us."

It seemed to come as news to Josh. He was about to ask who finances digs these days, when Siemens went on.

"The money nowadays comes from institutions. Educational and cultural foundations, that kind of thing. To be honest with you, it's a bit of a headache. Filling out all those grant applications and such. I don't mind telling you, whenever I read about those old archaeologists and their wealthy patrons, I do feel a bit jealous. But of course, the upside is, the foundations tend to stay out of our hair." He suddenly realized what he'd said. "Oh not that you're—"

"Don't worry about it. I only hope I've put an end to that, doctor. Jealousy must be such a distraction for a scientist." It was time for him to take the upper hand, at least conversationally.

Ahead of them, well down the path, the dig site came into view. There were a dozen or so tents and a pair of apparently improvised sheds. The ground was marked out into a large grid with wooden pegs and string. Twelve or fourteen people—students, to all appearances—were working at various jobs, some digging, some studying specimens on folding tables . . . A number of others, from the look of them Egyptians, were doing scrub labor, carrying baskets of earth and so on. It was, as they say, a beehive of activity.

Josh decided he liked the look of it. "To be honest, doctor, I think it's a pity that old system of patronage has died out. I grew up on those stories of Lord Carnarvon financing Howard Carter's search for the tomb of King Tut."

Siemens stopped walking and looked at him. "I hope you don't take that nonsense about a curse seriously."

"No. Of course not. I'm a good old-fashioned, no-nonsense Yankee. I know better than that." Siemens's sudden seriousness caught him off-guard.

"Yankee?"

"Well, Pittsburgher."

"Good, Mister . . . Josh. I'm glad to hear it."

"You do know that this is something of a family tradition for us Brandts? Both my father and grandfather financed excavations here."

"I had heard that, yes. Didn't they both—?"

Before he could finish his question, one of the workers ran up the hill from the camp to join them. He was a boy, hardly twenty years old, and he was so blond and virile it was silly. And he had to be a jock, at least an amateur one. Josh looked him up and down. Cut-offs, work boots, no shirt. When the kid smiled, he showed more teeth than a great white shark. He was clearly one of God's own. Siemens introduced them. "Colin, this is our patron, Mr. Joshua Brandt, here on a visit. Mr. Brandt, Colin McKay."

Josh extended a hand to him. "Call me Josh."

Colin smiled again, and it was a dazzling smile. He was plainly the kind of young man who'd go far, fast. Josh found himself wondering why he'd chosen a field as comparatively dull as archaeology. The kid would make a killer politician. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Colin."

But Colin didn't return Josh's regard. He focused on his mentor and told him, "We think we've found something."

"Really?" In a flash, Siemens seemed to forget Josh was there. "Let's go see."

The boy and the professor headed quickly down the path, leaving Josh to follow. He felt a bit odd; his money *was* paying for all this, after all. He loped down the hillside, trying not to let it show that he was more than mildly pissed. If it really was a big find, after all, their excitement was justified. And he *was* an outsider, kind of. But still, they should have—

There was a flurry of excited activity at the camp. One of the students placed something, quite carefully, on a table, and

everyone else gathered around—everyone but the Egyptians, who went on doing their manual labor. There was an air of anticipation and, against his will, Josh found himself getting caught up in it. Could they really have found the tomb? Or something else important? His name would be in all the journals, as the man who'd financed the excavations. It was a bit of a rush.

More and more quickly, he trotted down to the dig site. Siemens reached the table and bent over to examine whatever it was. His crew crowded around him tightly. Whatever it was, Josh couldn't see it.

When he finally got there, no one paid him the least bit of attention. He arched his neck, trying to see over the group to the table, but one of them muttered, "Don't push!" and elbowed him away.

A minute later Siemens remembered him. He looked up from the table, peered around for a moment and asked loudly, "Where is Mr. Brandt?"

"I'm here." Josh raised his voice but tried not to let his annoyance show. "What have you found, doctor?"

"Oh, there you are. Please, come up here. You chose a fortunate day to arrive. Perhaps you are a good luck charm for us. Everyone, this is Mr. Joshua Brandt, the man who financed our dig."

Suddenly the students were all deference and politeness. They parted to make a path for Josh, and he ambled slowly and importantly forward to the table. His desire to be on a first-name basis with all of them had faded rather quickly.

As did his enthusiasm at the find: on the table were three fragments of what must have been a clay pot. That was all. Siemens hovered over them excitedly, brushing them lightly with what looked like a medium-sized paint brush. Josh looked at them. "Oh." He didn't try to hide his disappointment.

"These are invaluable, Mr. Brandt." Siemens turned into a lecturer. "The style of this pottery dates precisely to the time when Ankh-es-en-Amun lived and died. And these hieroglyphs"—he indicated them with a fingertip, being careful not to actually touch the fragments—"appear to be part of her name."

Josh hoped his disappointment wasn't too obvious.

But evidently it was, because Siemens continued lecturing him. "The really important finds in Egyptology are not the spectacular ones, Mr. Brandt. Flash and glitter are almost always phony. I could show you places in these hills where the locals turn out high-quality fake antiquities by the barrel full."

"I am not—"

"Tourists are impressed by showy things. They want to go home with the crown of a pharaoh or the gold brassiere of Cleopatra. But we are scientists."

"Of course, doctor, but I—"

But Siemens was on a roll and not about to be stopped. "It is the small things that teach us the important facts about life in the ancient world. A pot, a little jar for eye makeup, a simple inscription that shows a man grieving for his dead daughter. Those are the things that make the ancients come alive for us. And that emphasize how much all human beings have in common, and always have."

As Siemens spoke the students ignored him, talking softly among themselves, scanning the ground for more pottery, anything but listening to their professor. His words seemed to be meant for Josh and Josh alone.

Josh decided he'd been "taught" long enough. But he wasn't certain how to react, at least not in a way that wouldn't make him seem the crass millionaire and nothing more.

Thankfully Colin McKay picked up on what he was thinking. "Surely that isn't the case, Dr. Siemens. I mean, I don't want to be in a position of calling my teacher wrong." The other

students laughed uncomfortably at this. "But surely it's the strangeness, the *alienness* of Egypt that makes it so fascinating to us. And that teaches us how many different ways there are to be human, for that matter."

Siemens resented it; it showed. But McKay must have been the star pupil, the up-and-coming archaeological horshot, so there was no actual reprimand. Curtly he replied, "You may have a point, Mr. McKay."

And suddenly Josh found his role. "I think there's a lot of justice in what both of you say. The truth must lie somewhere in between."

No one seemed to know what to make of this; Josh had the impression it sounded dumb to them, or maybe just obvious.

Siemens decided the discussion had gone on long enough. He announced loudly that everyone was to get back to work on the grid. "It looks like we may be on the right track. Let's find more."

Slowly, and apparently unhappily, the students went back to their various posts, took up their digging implements, and began to scratch the earth for more potsherds. Despite Siemens's little lecture, Josh found himself hoping they'd find something at least a bit more spectacular than bits of clay. He watched as they went back to their business; Siemens wrapped the three fragments in a piece of cloth and carried them off to one of the tents.

Seeing Josh alone and unattended, Colin rejoined him. "You shouldn't let Dr. Siemens's manner throw you off. He's a brilliant field archaeologist, you know."

"That's what they told me when I decided to underwrite this dig. Everyone said he was one of the best."

"If Ankh-es-en-Amun is around here, he'll find her."

Josh made himself smile. "That's good to know."

"Are you thirsty?" He looked around and lowered his voice. "I've got some bourbon in my tent."

It caught Josh off-guard. Should the boy have liquor here? Should he be telling the dig patron about it? But then, he reminded himself, Colin was the kind of young man who could get away with almost anything. "Uh, no thanks. I came here on a serious visit, to see how my money's being spent."

The gentle rebuke was lost on McKay. His voice became a confidential whisper. "Something to smoke, then? This Egyptian hash is the best."

"Thank you, no." He hoped he wasn't coming off too stiff. This expedition crew of his was not shaping up anything like what he'd expected.

Colin smiled his trademark smile again and said that he should be getting back to work.

A moment later Siemens came back out of the tent. "Mr. Brandt—I'm so sorry. I'm afraid I got caught up in the excitement of the find and forgot about you. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Please, don't give it another thought."

Siemens offered him a drink of cool water, then offered expansively to show him around the camp.

"I was hoping you would, doctor."

And so he got the grand tour, or as grand as a collection of tents and pits in a desert valley could be. Siemens explained how all the promising spots were corded off into grid squares, and each one was examined meticulously. "The days when archaeologists just stormed around digging everywhere, battering their way into pyramids, stealing everything that isn't nailed down, are well behind us. We do things methodically. *Scientifically.*"

Siemens was a born lecturer, and he lectured Josh on everything connected with the camp. Josh listened politely, trying to take it all in and, more to the point, trying to figure out how they all didn't kill each other out of boredom. He made occasional comments—"Yes," "I see"—but this was

Siemens's show; Josh was only the audience, and Siemens was nothing if not a good salesman for his work.

When they got back to where they'd started, Josh thanked him for the tour. "I only hope old Ankh-es-en-Amun is flattered by all the attention."

"If her tomb is around here, I promise you we'll find it." The professor seemed pleased at his attentive new student. He smiled and called Josh "Josh," and for the first time it didn't sound forced.

"Would you like to stay for dinner? I'm afraid we don't have anything you could call cuisine, but it's good, solid food."

"Thank you, Dr. Siemens. But I'd like to get back to the hotel. It's been a long day, and I'd like to catch a nap before supper. Then I want to explore Luxor. I haven't had much chance to see the real Egypt, you know."

"It's a long way from Pittsburgh, Josh."

"That's what I'm hoping. And . . . I'd like to see the Valley of the Kings tomorrow."

"I can have one of the students show you the valley, if you like. And there are other wonderful things to see here. The Colossi of Memnon, the Ramesseum . . ."

"Is that where Shelley wrote that poem?"

"'Ozymandias,' yes. 'Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.' Egypt has a way of humbling nearly everyone. Civilized men and women have walked these sands for six thousand years."

It wasn't exactly a new thought, but it gave Josh pause. *Should we be meddling here, in a place so old? Shouldn't we let them rest in silence?* But asking those questions of a dedicated excavator would hardly have been the proper thing. "I want to see all of it, or at least as much as I can fit into my schedule."

"Why don't I have one of the students see you back to the Winter Palace?"

"Thanks, but I think I can mange."

Siemens ignored this. "Colin!"

Josh's heart sank. He was to be escorted by all that bronze, hearty athleticism. Why didn't Siemens pick one of the girls?

Siemens crossed to Colin, not the other way around. They had a quick exchange, and Colin glanced pointedly at Josh once or twice. A moment later Josh and his chief excavator were shaking hands, and Colin was at the ready to play guide and dazzle him with his blond virility all over again. Josh decided he liked Egypt more than Egyptologists.

On the path back up the hill from the camp, Colin wasn't very talkative. Josh had the impression the boy was sizing him up, trying to guess what approach would be most productive with this potentially very useful new contact.

They reached the top of the path and started to descend. Colin pointed to a distant spot. "That's your jeep, way down at the foot of the valley?"

Josh nodded. "Dr. Siemens said it would never make the hills."

"He always says that. He ought to try sometime, and see."

"No, it worked out for the best, really. I got to see the valley and everything at a human pace."

Colin seemed unimpressed. "Somebody said your father used to back digs, too."

"Yes. It's a family tradition, I guess. My grandfather, too. Neither of them ever turned up much, though."

"Well, I guess it gets you out of Pittsburgh."

Josh laughed at this; he wasn't certain why. "From what I've seen of Luxor, it's not exactly a bustling metropolis."

"Outside of the tourist season, it's almost dead. But there are things to do here. You sure you don't want to smoke?" He reached into his pocket for a joint.

"No. Thanks, but . . ." Josh smiled, a bit sheepishly, then shrugged. "It's not my thing." He'd have to have a word with Siemens about this. Were they all doing drugs on his money?

"Suit yourself. What about women?"

Josh blinked. "What do you mean? What about them?"

Colin lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "I know where the whores' quarter is. And I know all the best girls."

Egyptian whores. "No thanks, Colin." Josh decided he liked him less and less.

They finally reached the jeep. Someone had opened the glove box and scattered the papers from it on the ground beside the vehicle. Josh muttered under his breath, gathered them up, and put them back where they belonged. "This isn't exactly the country I was expecting."

"You've never been here before?" He seemed surprised.

"Once, when I was little. I was eight or nine, and I came with my mother and little sister to visit my dad's dig. I don't really remember much except a lot of big ruins." He smiled. "They're probably bigger in my memory than they are in fact."

He started the jeep and drove quickly down the road to the Nile. It was late afternoon; shadows were long, and the landscape looked even stranger to him than it had before, which pleased him. He tried to force himself not to think, "Gosh Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore," but it was a losing fight.

"So." Colin stretched out in the passenger seat. "What exactly were your father and grandfather digging for?"

Josh slowed the jeep; there was something in the road ahead. It looked like a thin, emaciated dog with especially large, pointed ears.

"A jackal," Colin said helpfully.

"I know. Or at least, I thought that's what it was."

The animal stood in the center of the road glaring at the machine that was invading its domain. It bared its teeth and

snarled. Then, slowly, it loped away. Twenty yards away, it stopped and glared again.

"Jackals are the guardians of the dead, you know."

"Yes, I know. Egyptian mythology has always fascinated me, at least the better-known stuff."

"You'd be amazed how many people get their ideas about ancient Egypt from old Cecil B. DeMille movies."

Josh grimaced. "Bad writing and worse acting—no thanks."

"So about your dad's dig?"

"Well, actually it started with Grandfather."

"You're one of those old money families we always hear about?"

"Not that old." Josh laughed slightly. "My great-grandfather was a rumrunner during Prohibition. Then later, in the thirties, he ran guns for Franco. That's the basis of the Brandt family fortune."

"Did you know him?"

"He died years before I was born. I never knew my grandfather either."

"He died young?"

"No. He disappeared." Josh wasn't at all certain he wanted to be telling the boy this. "In Egypt."

"Oh."

"Yes." He kept his eyes on the road, not on McKay. "Oh."

CHAPTER 2

They reached the Nile. It was nearly sunset; a few bright stars were already shining in the eastern sky. Josh parked the car and they walked to the dock for the ferry. He hoped McKay would leave him there and head back to the dig site, but he was not to be lucky that way.

Colin pointed across the river. "There's your hotel."

"Yes, I know it." The Winter Palace stood high on the eastern bank, radiating a kind of faded Victorian splendor. Next to it was a small but lush park. Beyond that was the great Temple of Luxor, one of the most beautifully preserved in the country. As he watched, floodlights came on; the ruins were bathed in a rich golden light.

The ferry came at them across the river. It was nearly empty, and Josh commented that it had been crowded that afternoon.

"With tourists and the locals who make their living off them. Tourists don't like to be out after dark. There's no McDonald's on the western bank."

The ferry bumped heavily into the dock and the few passengers, all Egyptian, got off and went quickly about their business. Josh stepped onto the boat; to his displeasure, Colin did too. He was to be guided still more.

Looking for neutral conversation, he said he was really hungry.

"The Winter Palace grills a mean steak, Josh."

"I'm sure it does. But I want to eat where the Luxorites do. Do you know any good, authentic restaurants?"

Colin looked around and lowered his voice. "You mean you actually want to eat with these ragheads?"

"Yes." Josh stiffened; his instincts about McKay had been right on the money. "That is exactly what I mean."

"Well, I can't help you, there. I like to stay with the tried and true."

It was a relief. He could shake the kid off on a perfectly reasonable pretext. "Well, I guess we'll say goodbye at the dock, then."

McKay registered disappointment. "You sure you don't want to check out the whores?"

"Quite sure, thanks."

They fell silent for the few minutes it took the ferry to cross the Nile. Josh stepped off first, turned, and held a hand out to Colin. "Well, it was nice meeting you. Tell Professor Siemens I'll be back in the morning."

They shook hands.

Colin was all heartiness again. "So, are you going to tell me what happened to your father, then?"

The abruptness of the question caught Josh off-guard. "My grandfather disappeared first." He felt uncomfortable telling this to McKay, but it had been in the back of his mind ever since he set foot in the country, and he realized that saying it—to anyone—would be a bit of a relief.

There was a small saloon not far from the landing, and Josh ushered Colin inside and ordered whiskey for both of them. The place was filled with tourists; only the bartender seemed to be Egyptian.

They settled at a corner table, sipped their drinks, and Josh explained, "Granddad was digging for the tomb of Imhotep, a high priest of Anubis."

"The Great God of the Dead," Colin said pointlessly.

"Yes. Exactly. And something . . . something happened. He and his team simply . . . disappeared. No one ever found a clue as to what had happened to them, or why."

"The ancient gods are jealous gods, Josh."

"Don't be absurd. Then a generation later my father came. Looking for that same Imhotep, as a matter of fact. But I think he was really looking for some sign of what had happened to Granddad. Or maybe I should say he was looking for that too. I was never certain. He . . . he disappeared when I was ten."

"So you were raised by your mother?"

"And my grandmother." The bourbon was loosening him up; part of him didn't want to be opening up to the kid this way; another part of him needed to. "Grandmother Violet. She's quite a formidable woman."

"I'll just bet she is. And what about you?"

"Are you asking me how formidable I am?"

"No, I want to know what's behind this dig. Do you really give a damn about a dead-and-buried princess, or is this a family thing?"

"With my family, I'm not certain there's any difference."

"Oh." There was long pause, then Colin asked, "You do know that Ankh-es-en-Amun was the 'beloved' of Imhotep, don't you?"

"No. I had no idea." Weird coincidence.

They had another round of drinks, then another. Josh was definitely feeling the effects. Then suddenly he realized that there was one Egyptian in the place after all. He was tall, thin, old—Josh couldn't quite decide how old; anywhere from fifty to five hundred. And he was watching them.

"Do you know who that man is?" He nodded slightly in the Egyptian's direction.

"Mm-hmm." McKay didn't seem to want to let go of his glass. "Name's Ardath Bey. He's rich. Owns half the town, or something like it, maybe half the country. Very old money. Kind of mysterious. And he shows up at our dig every now and then."

"Really?"

He drank and nodded.

Josh watched the man. "What for?"

But before McKay could answer, the Egyptian man put on a tight smile and crossed the room to them. He moved in a graceful, almost feline way, Josh thought. And he was even taller than he'd seemed at first. Josh was six feet two; this man must have had at least two inches on him.

As he reached them, the man's smile became even wider and he asked, "Surely you are Professor Siemens's assistant?"

"Yes, I am." Colin was quite drunk by now. He tried to stand up, staggered, and fell back.

Ardath Bey repressed a laugh. "And you, sir. May I inquire whether you might be Mr. Joshua Brandt?"

It caught him off-guard. "Well, yes, I am. Mr.—?"

"Ardath Bey." He nodded slightly.

Josh reached out to shake his hand.

But Ardath Bey recoiled. "I dislike being touched. Please forgive an Eastern prejudice." He smiled, but his smile was cold. "But I suppose you can't possibly remember me." His voice was a refined, cultivated one, with an almost musical lilt to it. "I was . . . involved with your family, a great many years ago, when you were only a child."

"You were?" He realized he was sounding callow, even naïve. "I mean, no, I'm afraid I don't recall."

The man was dressed expensively. His galabia was of extremely fine linen; Josh had an idea how expensive it must be. And he wore two rings, one on each hand, both very large emeralds. They were real; Josh was quite certain of it. And around his neck hung two amulets, one of a dog or a jackal, one of a bird with a human head, both made of what seemed to be white gold.

"I knew your father." Ardath Bey's smile disappeared. His face was lined quite deeply. Josh decided he must be seventy, at least. "And your grandfather before him. And I have had extensive dealings with your family corporation."

"Uh . . . I'm afraid I don't . . ."

"But I can hardly expect you to remember an old man you met when you were only eight years of age."

"I'm sorry, sir."

It made sense. Ardath Bey was obviously a wealthy man. Egypt was an oil-producing country. And the Brandt money came from energy. And yet . . . something about this man was a bit odd, just ever so slightly disquieting.

"If I may ask, Ardath Bey, how did you know me?"

The man smiled again and nodded slightly. "From your photographs in the international press. A wealthy, politically connected American family like the Brandts provides fascination for the world."

Josh felt himself blushing a bit. "To be honest with you, I do my best to avoid 'the international press.' All that nagging attention. Happily, they chase after movie stars more relentlessly than us rich boys."

Ardath Bey made no visible reaction to this. Instead he asked, "And how is that sweet little sister of yours?"

But before Josh could answer, McKay shifted his weight irritably. He was plainly annoyed that this "raghead" was upstaging him for Josh's attention. "Well, listen I've got to get going." He spoke to Josh and ignored the Egyptian. "I have a date with those girls we talked about." He leaned close to Josh and whispered, "You sure you don't want to come?"

"Yes, Colin, I'm sure."

Heartily, McKay gave him a big jockboy handshake. "I'll be going, then. See you tomorrow morning at the dig." Without another word to either of them he turned and walked out of the tavern.

Josh, a bit embarrassed by him, smiled at Ardath Bey and said, "He's a student."

"That much, Mr. Brandt, was obvious. The question is, a student of what?"

Josh laughed.

"Do you have no interest in girls, then, Mr. Brandt?"

Josh found the question annoying. This man seemed stranger and stranger to him. "I gave up on the kind of girls Colin is looking for when I was in high school."

Ardath Bey looked at the door, as if he might still see McKay standing there. "I see. Your young friend may get more than he hopes for. I'm afraid Egyptian prostitutes are notorious for the diseases they carry. There are stories from as long ago as the eighteenth century of unsuspecting Western travelers taking more home with them than antiquities."

Again Josh laughed. "Well, I think Colin is a conservative. Being part of a long tradition will please him."

For the first time Ardath Bey seemed to relax a bit, to set aside his stiff formality. "You do not like the young gentleman?"

"Let's just say I find him . . . problematic."

Instead of smiling again, Ardath Bey suddenly looked around the bar. "I am somewhat surprised to find you in an establishment like this, Mr. Brandt."

"I wish you'd call me Josh." Uncertainly, he looked around. "Is there something wrong with this place?"

"It is not exactly one of Luxor's premiere establishments. A shabby tavern for shabby tourists. Might I be permitted to buy you dinner in a more suitable restaurant?"

"Why I'd be honored, Mr.—"

"Ardath Bey."

Back to formality, then. "Ardath Bey," Josh repeated. "Can we go to an Egyptian restaurant? I don't want to see another American for an hour or two."

"I know an excellent establishment."

"Fine, then. It will be a complete pleasure."

Ardath Bey led the way out of the restaurant and into the Luxor marketplace. The streets were crowded, as they would be at dinnertime in almost any city. Everywhere Josh looked there were tourists, most of them carrying cameras. But they were outnumbered by the Luxorites; there was quite a throng of them, men, women, children.

Ardath Bey warned Josh to watch his wallet. "Charles Dickens could have learned quite a lot about child crime in the streets of Luxor."

The sun was going down and would set soon; stores, taverns, vendors' stalls began to light up. Josh said he was delighted to see that a lot of them used twinkle lights, the kind he associated with Christmas.

"Then let me be the first to wish you a Merry Christmas, Mr. Brandt."

"In May. I like it."

"Naturally, we are not a Christian people. There are the Copts of course, but . . ." He paused and that slight smile returned. "We have learned how to celebrate, for the Western tourists."

"You are a Muslim, then, Ardath Bey?"

The man's face turned to stone. "We are a very ancient people. Surely, you know that, Mr. Brandt."

"Is there anything I can do to get you to call me Josh?"

"You must forgive the rigid manners of an old man." He nodded in Josh's direction. "Josh."

They passed a silversmith's shop. Josh stopped for a moment to inspect some of the goods in the window. "I'd like to take something home for my sister."

"You are particularly close to her?"

"She is quite special to me. Of course, I mean to buy things for the rest of my family too, but Stephanie is, well, let's just say she's had a difficult life, more so than the rest of us. I'm dedicated to making her as happy as I can."

"She must be a fine young woman."

"To be honest, Ardath Bey, she's got a bit of hell in her. But I love her. And she loves gold and silver."

"There are better shops. You must let me show you one. Tomorrow, perhaps?"

"I'm going back to the dig tomorrow, I'm afraid."

"The next day, perhaps?"

"I have to get back to Pittsburgh. My grandmother's birthday."

They began walking again. "So you are financing an archaeological excavation, as your father and grandfather did before you."

Josh nodded.

"May I ask what you are looking for?"

"The tomb of a New Kingdom princess called Ankh-es-en-Amun."

"Here is our restaurant. Let me have a word with the owner. If there is a private dining room available, it will be ours."

Josh would have preferred dining in the public rooms of the restaurant, for the experience. But before he could say so, Ardath Bey disappeared inside.

He stood and watched the crowd in the marketplace, which Ardath Bey had told him was called the *souk* in Egyptian. Some of the women wore veils, others didn't. Some of the children were well-behaved, others were terrors. Vendors were selling food, textiles, lamps, metalware . . . Just beside him was a stand with lemons and limes; their odor was strong, sweet, and unmistakable. It was a rich, vibrant, wonderful chaos. Like a mall, he told himself, but with better goods for sale. And real food.

A moment later a short, rather plump Egyptian woman appeared at the doorway. "Mr. Brandt?"

"Yes."

"I am Nora Ali, the proprietress. Ardath Bey asked me to show you to your dining room."

"It's quite a pleasure to meet you, Miss Ali."

"Please call me Nora. Everyone does." At last, he told himself, someone who doesn't stand on formality. He decided he liked Nora. He followed her through her public dining room, which was crowded with customers, mostly men, smoking, eating, and talking.

The private room was small but lushly appointed. There was a low table, only a foot or so off the floor; it was wooden, carved with elaborate designs and inlaid with ivory. The windows were high in the wall and were covered with grilles in intricate geometric patterns. And there were at least two dozen brocade cushions, all of them in a rich wine-red color and covered with more geometrics in needlepoint.

Ardath Bey was seated at the table when they came in, serenely smoking a hookah. He stood and bowed rather solemnly to Josh, then said something to Nora in Arabic. She left, pulling a curtain behind her; it was heavy red velvet, and it effectively cut off most of the sounds from the restaurant.

"Welcome, Mr. Brandt."

Josh laughed. "Are we back to that?"

"Forgive me. The habits of a lifetime are not easy to set aside."

"Believe me, Ardath Bey, I forgive you."

They sat down, and almost instantly Nora reappeared with a tray. There was a silver teapot and cups made from what Josh took to be rock crystal. This was to be a fancy dinner indeed.

Nora poured tea for both of them, then went to a corner and lit an incense burner. Wisps of smoke curled upward, scented with some spice Josh couldn't quite place.

"Cardamom," Ardath Bey explained. "It was a favorite spice here in ancient times. It featured in all the best households and in all the most succulent dishes. Now it is rarely used except by Scandinavians." He said the word with a hint of distaste.

Josh recognized it. "Our cook when I was a boy used to bake the most wonderful bread with it."

"Was she a Swede, by chance?"

"No, just a Pittsburgher." He sipped his tea. It was flavored with mint, and it was delicious. Noting Josh's evident approval, Ardath Bey drank his, too.

"May I ask about those amulets you're wearing, Ardath Bey?"

"Ancient symbols." He fingered them one at a time. "This bird with a human head is the *ba*, the ancient representation of the human soul. This other one I assume you recognize as Anubis, the Great Lord of the Kingdom of the Dead."

"Anubis, yes, of course. I'm afraid I've never heard of the other one, though."

"It was the soul that mattered to the ancients. The body was only preserved to house it."

"I see. Do you know a great deal about the old beliefs?" He drank more tea. There seemed to be something else in it. Josh realized he was feeling a bit high. Was it laced with some liqueur, maybe? Or was something burning other than just incense?

"A great deal, yes. Some of us revere the memory of the greatness that once resided in this desert land, Mr. Brandt." Ardath Bey closed his eyes; he seemed to fade into a trance. But he kept talking. "Egypt ruled the world, and Egypt's gods were the world's gods. And implicit in everything we believed then, implicit in everything we knew about the gods, was death. The Great Lord of the Empire of the Dead reigned supreme."

This was not at all the conversation Josh was expecting. "You sound quite passionate about it, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Indeed, Mr. Brandt, I am." He opened his eyes and stared directly into Josh's.

"But . . . I mean . . . gods and goddesses? Surely the world has outgrown that kind of belief."

"Outgrown? Or degenerated?"

The question surprised him. He stammered, groping for a response that wouldn't sound idiotic.

But Ardath Bey went on. "Does it not seem to you that a system which recognizes multiple gods holds a much more precise awareness of the complexity and diversity of the world and the universe?"

"I can't say I've ever thought about it like that." He couldn't quite decide if the question was intriguing or just silly. Multiple gods.

"Even though the world has lost sight of the fact, Death rules everything. Death dominates all our lives." He took the Anubis amulet from around his neck and placed it in Josh's hand. "The entire modern world tries to deny the fact, or to obscure it, or to bluff it out of existence." Abruptly he changed tone. "I knew your father and grandfather, Mr. Brandt. When they were here despoiling our—when they were here, excavating."

"What were they like? I never really knew them. Any recollections you can share with me—"

"They learned. Death rules us all."

Josh's head was spinning. There was definitely something in the incense, maybe hashish, maybe something even more dangerous. It was an effort to focus his eyes on Ardath Bey. He had thought the man was a friend. Now . . . The feline way the man moved seemed almost predatory. The soft cadences of his speech were ominous, not comforting.

He looked at Ardath Bey, and Bey was looking at him, with the most piercing gaze he had ever experienced. The picks and shovels of the excavation team did not penetrate as deeply as Bey's eyes.

Nora pulled the curtain open. She and a young boy brought in trays of grilled meat and vegetables. The serving platters were porcelain, pure white with more of those geometric patterns in bright blue. Cheerfully she said, "Nothing is too good for our American visitor."

Unable to think clearly, knowing the food must be laced with something too, Josh found he had no will to resist. He followed Bey's lead and ate. The meat was succulent. "This is delicious. The best I've ever tasted." Saying it, he realized his speech was terribly slurred.

Ardath Bey made an ironic little bow. "All for your pleasure, Mr. Brandt. Your father never really learned how to relax and enjoy himself before he—" He caught himself up short.

"You knew him that well?"

Ardath Bey's face turned to stone.

"How close were the two of you?"

The man remained completely impassive.

"And my grandfather?"

"He spent too much time pursuing the pleasures of the flesh. As the wealthy nearly always do."

"Aren't you wealthy, Ardath Bey?" He was feeling more and more groggy.

"I am blessed with the favor of the gods."

Impulsively Josh laughed. "What is the 'favor' of the god of death?"

"You shall learn that soon enough, young American."

The room filled with smoke, or Josh's vision did; he couldn't decided which. It was a thick green mist, so bright it seemed almost to be glowing. And when the smoke parted, the room was awash in blood. Nora Ali's serving boy was stretched across the table, dead; a pair of jackals were greedily eating his flesh. His blood flowed, gushed, like a swift fountain or a geyser. It filled the room, soaking the food, filling the teacups, and Josh ate and drank because he did not have the will not to.

In the blood there were figures swimming. It was not a roomful; it was a river, more vast than the Nile, and it was bright, hot red.

The people swimming in it were his family. His sister Stephanie drowned in blood. His Grandmother Violet sank serenely in it. His mother, sisters, cousins, three generations of his own blood swam in the river of blood Ardath Bey had made there in front of him.

And the blood corroded their flesh, as if it was acid. Bodily fluids seeped and mixed with the awful river. Their bones sank heavily.

Soon only Josh was left, standing on the shore in an impossible landscape, watching the river flow swiftly past him. The desert sands were red, and the river was redder, and the sun had that red-orange brilliance it takes on just before it dies. On the opposite shore his dead father and grandfather watched him and wept, then vanished.

He was alone, and he always would be now; he knew it. In the blood-red sky a falcon circled. And somehow, not visible but clearly there somehow, Ardath Bey dominated it all. Josh saw him, old and withered, flesh decaying and peeling from his body. And he saw Josh—and he laughed.

Slowly, knowing with dream logic that there was nothing else to do, Josh got down on his knees beside the river. And he drank.

CHAPTER 3

Someone was pounding at his door.

It was loud, insistent, and he wanted it to stop more than he had ever wanted anything before.

Josh opened his eyes. He was in his room at the Winter Palace. He had no memory at all of returning there, and blinding sunlight poured in through the windows. His head was throbbing.

"Josh? Josh Brandt?" someone called from outside the door. "Are you in there?"

The last thing he wanted at that moment was to see another human face. He muttered, "Go away."

More pounding, even louder. "Josh? We were all worried. We thought you were coming to the dig site this morning." The voice was Colin McKay's. If there actually were gods, they were taking their vengeance, all right.

"Will you stop that hammering, Colin?"

He did not. "Not till you open the door. Josh, we found it."

It took a moment for this to register. "What?"

"We found the tomb, Josh. Princess Ankh-es-en-Amun. It's the most fantastic coincidence that you're here when we found it."

Josh climbed out of his bed. He was naked, and he pulled the bed sheet around himself. "Is there anyone with you, Colin?"

"No."

He opened the door. Colin was as bright and chipper as always. Josh hated him. "Come in while I get dressed."

"When you didn't show up this morning, we were all so worried. Then we found the top step of the tomb entrance, and Dr. Siemens said we had to wait till you got there before we could open it." He stepped inside and looked around. "So this is a luxury suite at the Winter Palace."

"I need a shower. Will you call room service and have them send up some coffee?"

"How do you want it?"

"Black." Josh let the sheet drop, stepped into the bathroom and turned on the shower. "Like a scorpion."

"Should I have them send up some lunch?"

"Breakfast."

"It's two in the afternoon, Josh. What on earth did you get up to last night?"

"Never mind. See if you can talk them into making me some breakfast. At least some toast or something." He got into the shower.

A few minutes later he was drying himself when the bellhop came with his coffee. The boy looked from Josh to Colin, apparently not certain which one of them to give it to. Josh toweled his hair and muttered, "Leave it on the nightstand, will you? Colin, give him a tip."

The shower had wakened him a bit. When he was dressed he sat on the bed, sipped his coffee, and asked Colin to tell him about the find.

"Well, it's just awesome, Josh. Dr. Siemens had a good idea where the tomb would be, and we've been digging pretty carefully, and then there it was, just a few yards from where he expected it to be."

"What's it like?"

"We haven't been inside yet. We haven't opened it. For that, he insisted we had to wait for our patron to arrive. But we've got the steps cleared, and almost all the earth and rubble has been cleared from the tomb door."

"I appreciate that." He put his cup down irritably. "Why is Egyptian coffee so damn strong?"

"You look like you need strong coffee."

"Am I that bad?" He had avoided looking in the mirror. Now, he did. And he looked like hell, like he'd been on the worst bender in the world. Which, in a way, he had.

Colin watched him and smiled. "What was it? Hash?"

There was no way Josh could tell him he didn't know. He looked around for his hairbrush, couldn't see it anywhere and ran his fingers through his hair to arrange it. "But the tomb is like what you all expected?"

Eagerly, happy to be telling the story, Colin nodded. "There are seven steps cut down into the rock. Then a stone door. It's still undisturbed, the seal of the priests of the necropolis still in place. Do you know what that means? There's a good chance the tomb was never entered—never robbed. Like King Tut's. We think it might be filled with wonderful things. *Gold* things. This could be the richest, most important find since Howard Carter found Tut in 1922."

"As good as that?" Through the fog of his drug hangover, Josh was beginning to get excited. He downed the rest of his coffee quickly. "Let me get my clothes on, and we'll head out there. I can't wait."

"Well, she *was* only a princess, Josh, not a pharaoh. This may not be quite that spectacular. But the possibility's there."

As they were walking through the lobby the desk clerk waved to get Josh's attention. "Is Mr. Brandt quite well this morning?"

He was still feeling the effects of what had happened the night before; this was the last conversation he needed. "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I?"

"You do not remember, sir?"

Josh stared blankly.

"The police, sir. You were in Bahr Street, ranting, shouting, apparently . . . slightly intoxicated." A twinkle in the clerk's eye showed that 'slightly intoxicated' was not precisely what he meant. "Your family was in danger, you said. And the Nile had turned to blood and acid. They brought you in at 4 A.M. It is lucky for you it was the police who found you. There are people who would have gladly . . . et, taken advantage of a man in your condition. You were quite . . ." He let the thought trail off, unfinished. "For that matter, it is lucky the police recognized your name. For an American of your stature to have ended in an Egyptian prison . . . no, no, that would never have done."

Josh forced back a yawn, then glanced at Colin, who was smirking at him in a faintly superior way, like a fratboy lording it over a new pledge. Josh decided to ignore it; he turned back to the clerk. "You must thank the police for me." He handed the clerk a hundred-pound note. "It would never do for this story to get around."

"It is all over Luxor today, sir."

Another note. "Well, do what you can to kill it, will you?"

"I'll see what can be done, Mr. Brandt."

"Thank you." He grabbed Colin by the arm and hustled him toward the door. "Remind me not to travel alone again, will you?"

"Your staff doesn't drink?"

"Be quiet."

It was a brilliant, sunshiny day. Bahr Street and what he could see of the *souk* were filled with tourists and Egyptians. Josh wished for clouds, rain, and empty streets.

The Nile ferry was just landing when they reached the dock. The two of them stepped on, took a place at the forward rail, and a crush of fifty tourists pressed behind them. Josh lowered his voice and asked, "So the find hasn't been announced yet?"

"Dr. Siemens insisted we had to wait for you."

"Well, I appreciate that."

With a rougher-than-usual lurch, the ferry pushed off. A short, fat woman in a black dress, speaking what sounded like Italian, tried to push her way between Josh and the rail. He resisted, and she pushed even harder. Glaring at him, she muttered, "*Porco Americano.*"

Colin laughed. "Do you want me to push her into the river?"

"No, the Nile's polluted enough as it is."

Josh watched the river. "I can't believe what a deep, vibrant blue the Nile is. Like nothing else I've ever seen."

"Nile blue, yes," Colin smirked.

Josh fell silent.

Colin had a jeep waiting at the far side of the river. They drove quickly, without much conversation, across the plain to the low hills where the great tombs lay.

"This isn't the way Dr. Siemens took me yesterday, Colin."

"No, this is a slightly more roundabout route. I thought you'd enjoy seeing a bit of the scenery."

In the distance, on either side, Josh could see ruins of various kinds, temples, the oddly shaped towers called pylons, and even a pair of enormous statues. As the jeep approached them, he asked Colin, "These are the Colossi of Memnon?"

"Yes, exactly."

"And which one of them was it that used to sing to the rising sun every morning?"

Colin glanced at him, obviously a bit surprised. He pointed at the northernmost of the two. "That's the one. It was damaged in an earthquake. Fissures and passages opened up in the stone. And every morning, when the rays of the sun heated it, the air in those passages vibrated. The ancient writers say it sounded low and mournful, as if it regretted seeing a new day dawn."

"I'd rather believe it was alive."

"You're no scientist, Josh."

"No, I guess I'm not."

After twenty minutes they came to the entrance of the Valley of the Queens. The day was oppressively hot. Blinding sunlight poured down from directly overhead. There was a faint afternoon breeze, all that made the heat bearable.

Colin parked, and they walked, as Josh had with Siemens the day before. There wasn't much talk, except for Colin occasionally trying to find out what drug Josh had used the night before. Josh was finding the boy more and more annoying.

The doors of tombs gaped at them. It was impossible to make out anything inside them; the interiors black as midnight. He found it mildly thrilling. Those tombs represented mystery, romance, escape. And *his* dig had found something important.

They climbed to the top of the hill. Below them the camp was full of motion and activity. Folding tables were being set up; students were bustling every which way. Siemens was at the center of it all, supervising, apparently giving orders. And in the ground, clearly visible, was the pit where stone steps led down to the tomb entrance.

The pair of them started their descent; without quite doing it consciously, Josh walked quickly. He almost ran, at moments, and Colin had to work to keep up with him.

"She was quite a prominent princess, you know." He decided to lecture Josh some more. One-upmanship clearly mattered to him. Josh tried to ignore him, but he kept right on talking. "She was the high priestess of the god Anubis, the Lord of the Underworld, the Ruler of the Dead. Her male counterpart was Imhotep, the god's high priest."

"The one my grandfather tried to find." He said it with a bit of emphasis, to let Colin know he knew something, at least.

"Exactly. The old scrolls are ambiguous, but the two of them may have been lovers."

When they reached the foot of the path, Dr. Siemens saw them, put on a hearty smile, and crossed to them. "Mr. Brandt! How good to see you. We were worried."

"If you don't start calling me Josh, I swear I'll put *you* in the ground."

Siemens laughed. "We tried calling the hotel, but they wouldn't tell us anything about where you were. We were expecting you first thing this morning."

He appreciated their discretion; he'd have to tip them well again when he got back. "I'm afraid I, uh . . . I'm afraid I had a little adventure."

"A carefully chosen word." He narrowed his eyes, but his smile got even wider. "What exactly did you get up to?"

"Nothing, really." He didn't want to be making small talk. "Why don't you show me the tomb?"

"Of course. Over here."

There were wide steps cut into the bedrock, thirteen of them, leading down to a stone doorway. Three students, two young women and a slightly older man, were on their knees, clearing the last of the dirt and debris. They worked calmly; Josh wondered why they didn't seem as excited as he felt.

Siemens led him carefully down the steps. Josh asked him if the number thirteen had any special significance for the Egyptians.

"Nothing special, no. I mean, it seems to have meant bad luck to them. Perhaps even bad luck to the point of death. That's true of every ancient culture, though."

At the bottom of the steps, another young man was working patiently at what would have looked like the handle of a door, except for the fact that it was made of stone and bound with what seemed to be very old twine.

Just as they reached him, the young man looked up and grinned. "It's exactly as we expected, Professor. The seal of the

necropolis. Seven jackals." As an afterthought he added, "Good morning, Mr. Brandt."

"Hi." Josh turned to Siemens. "Jackals. Weren't they sacred to Anubis?"

"The Lord of the Dead, yes."

But the young student wasn't finished. "There's something else here. Look at this inscription."

Siemens bent down to inspect it.

But the boy didn't give him time to see what it was. "It's a curse," he said cheerfully. "Just like King Tut's."

"Let's hope it's equally ineffectual." Siemens got a magnifier out of his pocket. "'Here sleeps Ankh-es-en-Amun,'" he read. "'Good and faithful servant of Anubis. He who disturbs her rest before her time will surely enter hell. And his family shall prepare the way for him.'" He looked up at Josh. "Do you want to be the first inside?"

Josh laughed. "The honor will be all yours, Professor. I'm not afraid of any curse, but you've earned the right."

The door itself was made of a dark stone. Siemens placed his hand flat against it. "Basalt. Unusual."

"Why unusual?"

"It's one of the hardest stones known. Difficult to work. Most of the tombs in this area were fronted with limestone, which is a lot easier to work. And which makes up this whole valley. There's no basalt occurring naturally anywhere around here. But it would be especially hard to break through, with ancient tools. It looks like they were more than usually serious about not wanting her to be disturbed." He touched it again. "When it was new, it would have been quite completely black. Now it's been stained a bit lighter, probably with deposits from the surrounding limestone."

Josh decided he didn't care about the geology of the place. "When do we open it?"

"I think we can chip away one of the top corners of the door today. Just so we can get a look inside. Then it will take another day or so to remove the door completely."

"Can't we just smash through it?"

"This is science, Mr. Brandt—Josh. Things have to be done methodically."

He knew Siemens was right, but it was hard not to be impatient. The student who'd been working at the door got a digital camera and began taking photos of the seal and the inscription. Siemens told him to get as many as he could, from different angles and elevations.

Suddenly Colin interrupted them. "Doctor Siemens, it looks like our visitor is back again."

"Visitor?" Josh looked around. "I thought I was the only one who—"

"A bit of a pest." Irritably, Siemens climbed back up the steps to ground level. "An Egyptian who's been haunting this excavation like he owns it."

Josh followed him. Standing at the top of the hill, looking serenely down at them, was a tall, thin man in a white galabia. After only a moment Josh realized it was Ardath Bey. Josh froze. The memory of what had happened the previous night—while hazy—was enough to send a chill through him. "Who is that man? What is he doing here?"

Without answering, Siemens left him and climbed the hill, moving more quickly than Josh had seen him do before, and more quickly than he would have thought the man capable.

Siemens and Ardath Bey entered into what seemed an intense conversation, with a great deal of arm waving, at least on Siemens's part; Ardath Bey remained quite calm. Siemens's voice reached them faintly now and then; he sounded angry. He had struck Josh as calm and collected, in a detached, academic way; to see him so animated, and so obviously agitated, left Josh a bit startled.

He turned to Colin. "Who is that man?"

"You don't recognize him? His name is Ardath Bey. You met him last night, remember?" Colin shrugged.

"What's he doing here?"

"He hangs around here a lot. Claims he's the one who told Siemens this was the place to dig for the old girl."

"Is he?"

Again he shrugged. "He acts mighty proprietary."

Something occurred to Josh. "Why didn't you tell me this when we saw him last night?"

"I didn't think it mattered."

"You knew about him. You should have said so."

"I've seen him hanging around, that's all. I don't actually know him."

"Even so."

Colin plainly disliked being questioned like this. He moved away from Josh. It struck Josh as typical of Colin to want to be one-up over him, even with a seemingly pointless piece of information like that.

On the hilltop, Siemens was even more visibly agitated than before. He shouted something—Josh couldn't quite make out what—then came stomping back down the hill. Ardath Bey watched him for a moment, smiled for some reason, then turned and walked slowly away. In another moment he was gone.

"Professor, who is that man? What's he doing here?"

"He's no one. No one at all. Get me some tools, I want to open the top corner of the door."

That was as much as anyone needed to hear. The entire camp roused itself, even more than before. One of the young women who had been clearing the steps got Siemens hammer and chisel, and he descended to the basalt block in the doorway. Josh followed down the steps and stood just behind him. Every-

one else in camp crowded around, making a wide semicircle. There was some faint talk, but mostly everyone stayed quiet.

There had been a slight breeze cooling the valley. It stopped. The sunlight and heat became almost unbearable. If it wasn't for the event about to unfold, Josh would have been tempted to leave. He looked around the valley, and heat waves were rising from the ground, undulating in the afternoon air like spirits.

Siemens drilled three holes in a small triangle at the top left corner of the door. Then he tapped it with his hammer and chisel; bits of stone flaked away. The sound of metal hitting stone seemed to echo loudly, almost deafeningly, through the valley. He struck again, then again. "I don't think it's too thick. Makes sense—it would weigh a ton or more."

After a few minutes more of alternately drilling and chiseling, he seemed to tire. "Here, Colin, take over."

Colin did so, eagerly. Siemens took his place beside Josh. "Hard rock."

"That was the idea, wasn't it?"

"I sometimes wonder . . ."

"Hmmm? What do you mean?"

Colin hammered; Siemens watched him closely. "Well, I mean, how many of our modern Western leaders take religion seriously? Whatever they say in public, in private all they believe in is power."

Josh didn't follow him, and he said so.

"What I mean, Josh, is that I wonder how many of Egypt's real leaders—not the common people but the kings and the scholars and the diplomats—actually believed that all this embalming and preparation for death would actually lead to much besides a lucrative living for the priests and morticians."

It was an odd thought to Josh; he was used to thinking about ancient peoples and vanished cultures at face value. "I've never met a clergyman yet who really believed in the

stuff he preaches. For public consumption, sure, but . . . The ones I've known well enough for them to really open up to me have all admitted that they didn't believe it at all, themselves."

"Exactly what I mean, Josh. There's no way to know, of course, but . . ." He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

Then, finally, a chunk of stone about six inches wide came loose. Colin struck again, and his chisel made a hollow sound.

They had broken through. Colin turned and grinned at Siemens. The professor nodded, and Colin went back to work, slowly, carefully enlarging the opening. Siemens, without seeming to realize it, put a hand on Josh's forearm and squeezed tightly.

Everything in the valley seemed to go completely still. Even the heat waves seemed to stop. No one moved or spoke. It seemed to Josh there was a faint dull echoing sound—more accurately an echoing *absence* of sound, a kind of positive dullness—coming from the opening, as the first air in three thousand years or more filtered slowly in through the hole they had made. The sound of the chisel resonated more loudly than seemed possible.

The opening was four inches wide by now. Colin turned slowly back to Siemens and asked him if he should continue.

"Widen it just a bit more. We want to get a light inside, and take some photographs."

Colin went on with his work. Then, after several moments Siemens said, "Stop, that's enough. Let's see what we can see."

Oddly, he took Josh by the hand and led him back down the steps. Just as they reached the bottom, he glanced over his shoulder. Ardath Bey was back, standing halfway down the hillside this time, watching them intently and smiling. Though there was no wind at all in the valley itself, a breeze stirred his galabia; it blew eerily, almost in slow motion.

One of the students handed Siemens an electric light on a long extension cord from the camp's generator. It was small enough to fit through the hole. He inserted it delicately and began to lower it into the tomb. Colin was impatient. "Come on, Prof, faster."

"Be patient, Colin. It won't do us any good to have it hit the floor and break."

"But—"

"Patience."

The suspense had Josh on edge, too. "Can you see anything?"

As if this was a new thought, Siemens put his eye to the opening. Softly, obviously trying to keep control of himself, he said, "Yes. I see gold. There are marvelous things."

For what seemed an eternity he didn't move, just kept peering into the tomb. Colin looked like he was going to have a seizure if he didn't get to look next.

Siemens looked over his shoulder to Josh. Quite deliberately he said, "There is something else, too. Something unknown before now." He gestured at the opening. "Would you like to see?"

"Yes. Of course."

"I warn you, it is not a pleasant sight. You may even find it a bit shocking."

"What is it?"

"Here." He took a step back from the stone door. "Look."

Josh took his place and looked in through the hole. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light inside after the blazing sunlight; he found that shielding his eyes with his hands helped.

Yes, there was gold. A great deal of it. The chamber was perhaps ten feet by ten. And nearly every inch of it was filled with objects—beds, thrones, furniture, vases and jars, other things whose purpose Josh could only guess at. All of them had the distinct gleam of gold. He saw a jeweled scepter leaning

casually against a wooden chest. One of the thrones was covered in gold—he found himself wondering if it might even be solid.

There was so much there, it was hard for him to know where to focus. From behind him, Siemens asked, "Do you see them?"

"See what? There's so much."

"The corpses."

"The—!" He looked again. In the chaos, in the golden clutter, it became apparent to him what Siemens meant. At the far wall was another door, still sealed. That would lead to the actual burial chamber, Josh knew. But just to the right of it was a pair of human skeletons, locked in embrace. It must have been the way the light was hitting them, but they seemed to be grinning.

Softly, Josh said, "I've never heard of anything like this." He turned to Siemens.

"Neither have I. The Egyptians never buried the living with the dead. There was no need to—magic could send the princess all the servants she might need in the next world."

"Then—?"

"Those two men are dressed as soldiers."

Josh was lost.

Siemens took a moment to collect himself. "There are some indications that servants were killed and buried with their masters very early in Egyptian history. But that time passed very quickly. The Egyptians were civilized people. This . . . this is without precedent in the annals of Egyptology." He raised his voice. "Did you all hear that? We have made a momentous find here today. All of you will share in the credit."

Colin shouted, "We're made! Let's break in and examine them!"

"Colin!" Siemens shouted even louder. It was the first time Josh had heard him raise his voice with his students, and it seemed quite out of character for him. "Colin! You know

perfectly well we can't do that. A find of this importance must be documented, studied. We can't afford to make any mistakes. We'll have to bring in the Egyptian authorities."

He turned to one of the young women, who was waiting nearby with a digital camera. "Photograph everything. Do it slowly and carefully, but get as many good shots as you can. I know you can't do a lot, working through that small opening, but do what you can. We'll e-mail them to the Department of Antiquities. Unless I miss my guess, they'll have someone here first thing in the morning. Maybe even tonight."

For the first time, Siemens broke out in a wide smile. The magnitude of his find was beginning to sink in, it seemed. He climbed the steps to ground level and called everyone around him. When they were all assembled, he explained, in a loud, clear, careful way, exactly what they had found and why it was so important to preserve their discovery.

When he finished, Josh took his place to make a little speech. "Professor Siemens says we've done as much as we can for now, till the authorities get here. But in the meantime, I think a celebration is in order. I want all of you to come to the Winter Palace tonight. We're having a party!"

There was cheering. Two dozen faces registered every conceivable emotion. Two of the woman and one of the men were crying. Others were laughing, apparently uncontrollably. Amid it all, Josh forgot completely about Ardath Bey.

The photographer finished with her work. She handed the camera to another student, who headed off to the tent where the expedition's computers were kept. Siemens followed. The students broke up into little groups, twos, three, fours, and talked happily among themselves. Josh found himself, improbably, ignored.

He was still feeling the effects of the previous night's adventure. It was time to get back to the hotel. He'd make the arrangements for the party, then get some sleep.

Colin was talking to one of the women, apparently hitting on her; she was the only one in camp not smiling. Josh found him and told him what he was going to do. "Tell everyone 8:30 at the Winter Palace, okay?"

Colin said he'd spread the word, and Josh turned slowly and began to walk back up the hill. He was tempted to go back and take one more look into the tomb. But the golden, ghastly chaos he'd seen was etched vividly into his mind; another look wouldn't add much.

As he climbed the path, a jackal appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and began to snarl at him. He picked up a stone and shied it at the animal, which went yelping away.

As he topped the hill and began to descend the other side, he was quite unaware that he was being watched. The lack of sleep plus the day's excitement combined to turn his thoughts quite happily inward.

But on another hill, two hundred yards away, a solitary figure stood and watched and smiled. The jackal went running to him, and he rubbed its head as if it was a favorite pet.

The day remained still and hot. Except for the movement in the Siemens camp, everything in the world seemed quiet. Josh seemed to be the only moving thing in the landscape. There was still no wind, not a lick of it, and Josh broke out into a thick sweat.

But Ardath Bey's robes blew gently. The breeze that moved them came not from the sky or the river. It blew from the land of the dead. And it blew across three thousand years of time. Ardath Bey smiled, and in his smile was timelessness and death.

CHAPTER 4

The Winter Palace was more crowded than usual that night; an unexpected inflow of tourists had sold the place out. But Josh had managed to reserve a private dining room for the members of the Siemens expedition. He had to work hard not to think of it as *his* expedition.

He had a good nap in his room, then showered, shaved, and dressed to play the proud host. The front desk rang him when his first guests arrived. They were early; it was 8:15. He rushed down to greet them.

It was two of the girls. He met them, they re-introduced themselves—one of them was named Sally Bowles, who seemed to have no idea she shared her name with a well-known literary character—and he escorted them to the dining room. The staff were just setting out an expensive, elaborate dinner. Josh was about to comment on how good everything smelled when Sally said, "I hate all these smells. I'd give anything to be back in America."

A moment later an Egyptian man crossed the lobby and followed Josh into the dining room. He was fortyish, a tad plump—unusually for an Egyptian—and dressed in a white galabia and sandals. His head was bare. He smiled and asked, "Excuse me, but might you be Mr. Joshua Brandt?"

Josh couldn't imagine what the man might want with him. "Yes, I might."

"Mr. Brandt, sir. My name is Haroun Abd-er-Rasul." He said this as if he thought it should mean something to Josh, which it didn't.

"Mr. Abd-er-Rasul. What can I do for you?"

"You do not recognize my name?"

"I'm afraid not, no. You are—?"

"My grandfather Ahmed was the foreman on your father's dig, a generation ago."

"Ah." Josh smiled. He thought he remembered Ahmed, in the vaguest possible way. A tall man with a gray beard, who found time for little Josh despite his numerous duties on the dig. "It's a pleasure to meet you. And how is your grandfather?"

"He is bedridden, I'm afraid. A man in his nineties . . ." He spread his hands apart, in a gesture of resignation. "But he has asked if you might perhaps like to visit him. He remembers you quite well from those times."

"I'd be delighted to see him. I'd like to hear what he remembers of my father. He must have been among the last to see him before he—" He broke off the unpleasant thought. "Tomorrow morning, perhaps?"

"That would be excellent. May I call for you here? At ten o'clock, shall we say?"

"Ten would be fine, Mr. Abd-er-Rasul."

"Excellent. I hope your stay in Egypt will be happy and even more productive than it has been so far."

"I'm certain it will be, thank you."

Abd-er-Rasul bowed slightly, turned, and left. As he crossed the lobby to the exit, several more members of Josh's party came into the lobby and headed for the dining room.

A local jazz combo was tuning up their instruments. The concierge had given Josh his choice of music groups, and he decided he simply had to hear what Egyptian jazz sounded like. There was a sax, a bass, drums, a female vocalist, and a stringed instrument Josh couldn't identify.

Being host made Josh expansive. "Help yourselves. We've got everything you could want. Good food, and there's good wine chilling—French wine, not Egyptian."

A moment later, half a dozen more of the students entered, and they made straight for the food. Josh asked one of them where Professor Siemens was.

"He'll be along any time now. You know him, he's like a mother cat. He can't quite tear himself away from his baby."

"Well I hope he comes."

"He'll be here. He's enough of a politician to know he has to be."

It wasn't quite what Josh wanted to hear, but at least the man was coming. And everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. He went from group to group, making certain to remember their names this time, talking them up, learning who was who and what their jobs were. His motives weren't mere hospitality. This story would make news around the world, and he wanted to find out which of them was fit to talk to the media. Within twenty minutes, he had a fair idea. One thing was certain—he couldn't let Colin McKay get in front of a camera; he'd make the story about himself.

Finally Siemens arrived, with the last of his students. He crossed the room to Josh and they hugged heartily, like old friends. Josh led him to the food and wine. "And where is Colin?"

Siemens scooped up a plate of hors d'oeuvres. "He's staying at camp, to keep an eye on things. I shouldn't eat so much. My waistline. But this is a celebration."

"Do you really need a guard tonight?" He had been hoping Colin would drink too much and make a fool of himself.

Siemens ate as if he'd just come away from a famine. "We've prepare a press release, announcing our discovery. It will go out as soon as it's approved by the Antiquities Department. But . . ." He lowered his voice and looked around conspiratorially. ". . . Word seems to be spreading already that we found something."

"How can it? There was nobody there but us." He remembered Haroun Abd-er-Rasul's comment suggesting that *he*, at least, knew that something had been found.

Shrug. "You're in the Middle East, Josh. Things are different here. Gossip is a way of life."

"You should try mixing in Pittsburgh society. But—but is Colin the right guy to play guard? You heard him this afternoon."

"He's ambitious and impetuous. But he's also smart enough to know that this find can make him, make his career. His ambition is our best safeguard."

Josh had his doubts, but Siemens knew the kid better than he did. He clapped his hands loudly and waiters entered with trays of champagne. Josh himself took the first glass and proposed a toast. Everyone drank and cheered.

The combo launched into a rendition of "Someone to Watch Over Me." The vocalist sang a half tone sharp. Couples began to dance. Josh asked one of the waiters to lower the lights. It would not only be a night of celebration, it seemed, it would be a romantic one.

"By the way, Dr. Siemens . . . ? Do you by chance know a man named Haroun Abd-er-Rasul?"

"I've met him a few times. Can't say I really know him. Why?"

"He was just here. His father was my father's dig foreman. He invited me to visit the old man."

Siemens was impressed. "You should be honored."

"By a family of laborers?"

"You don't know the family? Their name?"

"No. What—?"

"The Abd-er-Rasuls are one of the most famous families in Egypt. They were tomb robbers, back when. One of them found that famous cache of royal mummies, the ones that were hidden in a cave in the hills."

Josh vaguely remembered the story. "I guess I never knew their name."

"They're fabulously wealthy. They must have stolen gold from half the tombs in Egypt. Then, when the Antiquities Service began to crack down on tomb robbers, they went legit. Used all the knowledge they had acquired through generations of theft to help us archaeologists with *our* thieving." He was feeling the champagne. "Everyone suspects they still traffic in, er, unofficial antiquities. But they're good enough at it never to have been caught."

"And Ahmed, the man who worked with my father?"

"One of the best. The cagiest. And the richest."

Just then, his cell phone rang. "Yes?"

"Joshua? It's your mother."

It was actually his mother's secretary; he was expected to hold till his mother was ready to talk. Josh quietly cursed the notion of "family values," then resigned himself to wait patiently.

"Joshua?"

"Hello, Mother. How are you?"

"Quite fine, Joshua." She was drunk.

"Mother, my expedition has made the most fabulous find."

"Very impressive, I'm sure. I'm afraid there is bad news."

Apparently his good news counted for nothing with her. "What happened? Have wheat futures dropped more than a point?"

"I wish I'd raised you better. Your manners—"

"What are you calling about, Mother? I'm in the middle of a party for my crew."

"How clever of you to have a crew of your very own. Your grandmother has had a stroke."

It caught him off-guard. "Grandmother Violet?"

"She's the only grandmother you have, isn't she?" Josh's mother had never gotten along with her mother-in-law.

"How—how bad is it?"

"The doctors are still evaluating. Her speech is badly slurred, and she can't seem to use the right side of her body." She sounded pleased about it.

"This is terrible."

"She is ninety years old, Joshua."

"Eighty-nine."

"I assumed you would want to come and be at her side." She sniffed and added, "Which is more than you would likely do for me."

"Don't start, Mother. Will she recover?"

"As I said, the doctors are still doing their little thing with her."

"Can she understand when people talk to her?"

"I presume so." She stopped to take another drink.

"Tell her I'll be home as soon as I can."

"Good. You can be here for the funeral."

"That's a terrible thing to say, Mother, even for you."

"Let us know when you're getting home. We'll have a car at the airport."

"My Corvette's parked there."

"It was stolen. The police called this morning."

Oh. "Fine. Send a car, then."

They said cool, formal goodbyes and hung up. Josh looked around the room. It felt as if, suddenly, someone had erected a transparent wall between him and the partiers. Without saying a word to any of them, he left the room and went to the front desk.

The concierge told him there was a pre-dawn flight from Luxor to Cairo; from there he could catch a mid-morning flight to New York, then connect for Pittsburgh. He would be home by the next evening. He thanked the man for making the arrangements and gave him a large *baksheesh*. Then he gave him an extra sum and told him to distribute it among the staff. "I'll be gone before most of them come on duty. But I appreciate everything you've all done for me. And I'll certainly be back."

He knew the concierge would keep a large chunk of the money for himself, but what the hell.

Back at the party, he took Siemens aside and explained that he had to leave on urgent family business.

The professor was drunk, and he was pawing the female student he had been dancing with. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"No. No, it isn't." The lie left a bad taste in his mouth, but he didn't feel like being any more open than was necessary.

At the dig site, Colin McKay sat in front of his tent, watched the night sky, and smoked some very good Egyptian hashish. It was stronger, even, than he was used to, but it gave him a really good high. Damn, he hoped he could find that guy in the *souk* who sold it to him again. He should have bought more. Damn.

The sky over the Valley of the Queens was flecked with a million stars, brighter than they ever were over Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, or even his home town of Johnstown. None of those places was what it had been in the great steelmaking days, but there was still industry, enough to pollute and darken the air. Here . . . was it just the hash, or were the stars really unnaturally bright tonight?

The last of his colleagues had left for Josh Brandt's party more than an hour ago. The only sound was the distant putt-putt of the camp's electric generator. It was at the far end of the camp, far enough away not to be too loud, and it lulled Colin into a gentle reverie. And of course the hashish helped. A bright, full moon rose over the eastern horizon. The smoke from the hash spiraled up in its light, glowing faintly in the night.

Something moved.

At night, here on the edge of the great desert, something always moved. Snakes, lizards, spiders, scorpions, jackals, all the nighttime things city dwellers have forgotten so happily, thrived there. The locals all said there were no jackals living this close to the city, this close to inhabited space. But there had been a pack of them around; everyone on the dig had seen them. There were even pups among them.

Colin closed his eyes and conjured up an image of the jackal god Anubis, the lord of the Egyptian dead. Jackals, they say, used to dig up the graves of the poor to eat the freshly buried corpses. The ancients had chosen their gods only too wisely. As he thought about it, a pack of them howled at the moon, somewhere out of sight, off among the hills. Their baying echoed through the valley.

Something moved again. For a panicked moment, he thought it might be a snake. He hated snakes.

One of the women in the camp had been bitten by a young cobra one night. A little thing, dark brown, barely more than a foot long. She was rushed to the hospital in Luxor, and the anti-venom barely saved her. The Egyptian doctor explained that the young snakes are the most venomous, since the poison is much more concentrated in them. Smug bastard; Colin hated these ragheads. But the cobra had been a god here, too. The ancients knew, the ancients understood.

Whatever had moved was still now—if it had been anything at all other than his drugged brain playing tricks on him.

As the moon climbed higher, it lit the landscape a ghostly white. Its light was bright enough to bring sharp relief to everything in sight, the tents, the tomb, even rocks and pebbles on the ground.

The tomb . . .

The stone door seemed to be calling to him yet taunting him at the same time. Siemens was right. It had to be opened

carefully, explored thoroughly and scientifically. He knew he mustn't let himself give in to the temptation to . . . No, that wouldn't be right.

Still again in the night something moved. The moon was bright enough that he should be able to see it. But there was nothing.

At the top of a nearby hill he saw someone. It was that man, that Egyptian, Ardath Bey. He was just standing there, watching. The air was absolutely still, no wind at all, but his robes stirred as if there was a breeze. Maybe there was one, up on the hilltop. But Colin didn't want him around. As loudly as he could he shouted, "Get the fuck out of here!"

Ardath Bey stood and watched. And though he was too far away for Colin to see it, he smiled.

He wanted the tomb and what was in it. Colin understood that clearly, even though he was stoned. Why else would he be there?

Colin would show him, he decided. He'd open the tomb first, explore it first. And . . . Howard Carter and his patron Lord Carnarvon had pocketed a few things from King Tut's tomb; he would do the same. He'd been here working for months. He had earned it, hadn't he? He was entitled.

He reached into his shirt pocket for more hash. He was out. Damn. But he had a bottle of gin in his tent. There was no ice and no tonic, but what the hell. He fished it out from under his cot, unscrewed the cap and took a long swallow. With nothing to cut it, it was way too strong for his taste. But he could feel it working almost at once; on top of the hashish, it was doing fine things to him.

Where was that sledgehammer? Or that pick? He couldn't remember who had used them last, or where they might have stashed them. But the camp was small; it wouldn't take long to find them. He reeled from tent to tent, even to the camp mess. Finally it occurred to him to check the storage tent. They were there.

The basalt door was hard; he expected that. He bashed at the open corner with the sledge and with the pick, again and again. He'd get in and take what was his, what he was entitled to, damn it. And he'd go down in the books as the first one to enter this fabulous tomb.

After half an hour's work, he was covered in sweat, and he was beginning to sober up. But he had increased the size of the original opening to the point where he thought he could squeeze through.

A light. He needed a light. And he needed another long drink. Back at his tent, he unpacked a large emergency-type spotlight, the kind drivers use when their cars die on the road at night. Then he swallowed half of what was left of the gin.

Gold. The tomb was filled with golden things. After the night, even a night lit brightly by the moon, the gleam from his light inside the tomb dazzled his eye. He decided some wit was called for, or what passed for wit in a man in his condition. "Ankh-es-en-Amun!" His voice resonated in the stone chamber, barely muffled by all the things inside. "Your lover is here! And he's coming for you!"

The opening was not quite large enough for him to fit through it comfortably, but he managed to squeeze. Not being in any condition to plan, he went head-first and fell to the stone floor. His light went out, and he fiddled with it till it flickered and came on again.

Clumsily, unsteadily, he climbed to his feet. Everything was still. He could hear his own breathing. For a brief, drunken moment, he even thought he could hear the beating of his own heart. The tomb was that quiet.

What had he landed on? Had he damaged anything important or valuable? He looked down to his feet. There were human bones scattered around them; some of them were crushed. The two soldiers at the far side of the chamber had not been the

only ones buried with the princess, it seemed. A wave of panic overcame Colin, and he jumped to one side, in the process falling onto an ancient bed and crushing it, too.

After a disoriented moment, he managed to calm himself. There was not enough light. How could he know he wouldn't step on more dead bodies, in all this clutter? He shined his light at the two dead soldiers; the movement of his light made *them* seem to move.

This had been a mistake. How could he explain this to Professor Siemens? There had to be a few small things he could take, things that would never be noticed. Then he'd get outside again and think up some story—local tomb robbers overpowered him and entered the tomb—that man, that Ardath Bey, had been at the head of them. That was it; anyone would believe that. Shiftless, conniving ragheads. Everyone knew about them.

For an instant he found himself wishing he'd brought his bottle with him. Then he realized, no, if it had broken, he'd never be able to explain that away. Ragheads don't drink. And it had to be more goddamned ragheads. *They* did this.

There was a tiny jar, no more than four inches tall. Carved in gleaming white alabaster. Decorated with brightly colored details—the name of the princess, a tiny portrait of the goddess Isis . . . It would fit in his pocket very nicely. He'd have to be careful not to break it when he squeezed out.

There was a scarab lying on the floor, carved in some bright red stone, not quite like any he'd seen before—another good souvenir. There was a little blue statue of the princess herself. There was—

Something moved. Colin jumped to his feet. He had heard it. There was something in the tomb with him, something alive.

He pointed his light at the dead soldiers again. One of them was gone.

Then he felt something take hold of his leg. Before he could point his light there, whatever it was yanked violently and knocked him to the stone floor. He hit his head. Lights sparked in his eyes; the room swam. When he was finally able to focus, he saw a skeleton standing above him, dressed in Egyptian soldier's armor. But he only saw for a moment. Its index fingers plunged down, into his eyes. His scream echoed deafeningly off the stone walls.

He fought, he struggled, he writhed. But he could still feel. And what he felt was the skeleton-soldier's bony hands, tearing the flesh from his legs, his stomach, his chest.

The last thing he felt, the last sensation to penetrate his consciousness, was the bone ripping open his chest, skeletal fingers clutching at his heart and beginning to tear it out.

On a hilltop not far from the tomb, Ardath Bey stood and watched and listened. The screams were not pleasant to his ears, but he smiled when he heard them. It was beginning. It would continue, and nothing human could stop it. He whispered a soft prayer to Anubis, Great God of the Dead. When the screams from the tomb stopped, Ardath Bey knew that the young American had gone to His realm.

It was late. The moon was nearly overhead. Time for him to return home. He wondered briefly if Colin McKay had perhaps met Princess Ankh-es-en-Amun in the afterworld. And, if he did, what he might say to her, or she to him? The possibilities were so amusing.

Finally the smile left Ardath Bey's lips. Some things are unknowable. There was no time to waste wondering about such things. Next would come Joshua Brandt. And his family.

CHAPTER 5

Hank Brandt was, as they say, the black sheep of his family. It was not that he was any more disreputable than a lot of the rest of the Brandts. It was because he had chosen to work in the arts, and in the popular arts, at that. The Brandts were old money, or at least old for Pittsburgh. Catering to the masses was simply not to be done. The only one of his relatives who had much to do with him was Josh.

Hank had had a long night. Drugs, sex, and then more of each. It was supposed to be a business gathering, but in the theater world, business gatherings tended to turn out like that. The threesome hadn't been very good, really, but the coke was dynamite. Now it was nearly six in the morning, and he had called an early rehearsal; the new show wasn't shaping up well. Time to get home and catch some sleep, even if he knew it wouldn't be enough.

The sky was just beginning to lighten. He climbed into his Lexus and gunned the engine. It was a good, smooth sound. For a moment, sitting there behind the wheel, he nodded off. Shit, he had to stop living like this.

Where was he? It took him a moment to remember the party had been in Squirrel Hill, in the east end of the city. It took him a moment more to remember how to get back to Mt. Lebanon from there. Maybe he shouldn't drive. No, fuck it. He'd never had an accident.

Traffic was light, even lighter than he expected. He caught a glimpse of his eyes in the rearview mirror. They were blood-

shot; he must look like hell. He was in his mid-thirties and looked ten years older. Fuck it, that was his cast's problem. They had to look at him; he didn't. That was the biggest perk of being a director.

The parkway was full of potholes, as always. He swerved to avoid one. There was a long stretch of open highway in front of him; inevitably he stepped on the gas. Somehow—in the brief instant before the crash, he told himself it couldn't be the drugs and booze—he lost control of the car. It lunged through the guard rail and over the bluff, landing on a lower level of the highway. The crunching sound it made when it hit the bottom struck him as odd, not what he'd expect. A good director could come up with something better. Then he passed out.

Fortunately, St. Zephyrinus's Hospital was only a few blocks away. The EMS crew got to him quickly. He was still breathing, but he seemed to have a serious concussion, and his body was cut in a hundred places by window glass, the splinters of which were still embedded in his flesh. They bandaged him, cushioned his head so he couldn't move it, loaded him into the ambulance, and got him to the hospital in a matter of minutes. Through all of it, he was quite unconscious.

When he woke, in his hospital bed, it was late afternoon. The bandage on his head was itching like crazy. The room was a double; there was a man in the next bed, covered in bandages head to foot, a nasty-looking IV dripping into each arm. The guy's TV was on, tuned to a loud game show.

"Hey!"

The man in the next bed didn't move.

"I said hey!"

Nothing. This wouldn't do.

He caught a glimpse of someone passing in the hall outside.

"Hey!"

The man stopped and put his head into the room. He was in green scrubs and he didn't look happy. "That's not exactly a polite way to get help."

"I don't want help. I want someone in authority."

The guy stepped inside. "I'm Nurse Jacobs. How can I help you?"

"You can get me an administrator."

"It's after business hours. They've all left for the day."

"How did I get here?"

Jacobs crossed to his bed, checked Hank's chart, and clucked his tongue. "Dear, dear, dear. Can you say 'substance abuse'?"

"Don't be a smartass. I'm Henry Brandt."

"Well?"

"I'm the artistic director of the Metropolitan Theater."

"Yes? And?"

"I'm one of the Brandt Industries Brandts."

Jacobs was clearly not impressed.

"I'm not used to being treated like this."

The patient in the next bed groaned, loudly. Hank glared at him, as if he could quiet the man by sheer presence. The man groaned again, louder.

"You see what I mean? I'm an artist."

"Doesn't that mean you should have some compassion? Mr. Buechel was almost killed in a traffic accident. His wife died."

"I can't function like this."

Jacobs smiled the least sincere smile Hank had ever seen and held out his chart. "If half of what this says is true, you're lucky to be functioning at all."

"I need a private room."

"There's no one you can talk to. Not till morning."

"I can't—"

"Listen, Mr. Brandt. This is a hospital, not a luxury hotel. I'm sure the staff will arrange things to your satisfaction in

the morning. In the meantime, I have a job to do. Excuse me."
His phony smile got even wider; he nodded slightly in Hank's direction and left.

Hank glared at the television screen. "Shit."

The overnight flight from Egypt to New York had been unusually turbulent, and it left Josh drained. Waiting in the airport for his connecting flight to Pittsburgh hadn't helped. He hoped it would be a smooth flight; he needed sleep.

It was raining when his plane left JFK for Pittsburgh, well before sunup. There had been severe storms across the Midwest, and they were spreading into the east; air traffic was slowed down by hours, and his plane had sat on the runway. It was almost dawn, and they were only beginning to approach Pittsburgh International Airport.

When he finally caught a glimpse of the city, through a break in the clouds, it looked strange to him. In a very short time, he had become used to the sunshine and dry weather of Egypt; Pittsburgh seemed slightly unreal. It seemed to him that it ought to be the other way around, but . . .

The flight attendant had fussed over him during their long wait and again all the way down from New York. Josh wanted to be left alone, but the guy was determined to provide first-class service for his sole first-class passenger. Finally Josh pretended to be asleep, but even that didn't work. The zealous young man pushed a pillow behind his head and covered his lap with a blanket. Finally, Josh gave up trying and decided to have a drink.

"What can I get you, sir?"

"I don't suppose you have any champagne . . . ?"

"No, sir, I'm afraid not."

"My dig just unearthed a major find."

"Your dig?"

"Never mind. Wednesday's my grandmother's ninetieth birthday."

"Then shouldn't she be the one to get champagne?" He smiled at his own "wit."

"Good point." He ordered a gin and tonic and hoped the guy would leave him alone.

His commuter flight had left Luxor before dawn the previous day. He hadn't heard about the death of Colin McKay till he was waiting in Cairo for his connection to New York. He had been thinking that the Cairo airport was the drabbest he'd ever seen, more like a converted warehouse than a dedicated air terminal, when his cell phone rang.

"Josh?"

He recognized Siemens's voice. "Professor. I didn't think I'd be hearing from you for a few days."

"Josh, something terrible has happened. Colin McKay is dead."

"You're joking." It couldn't have caught him more off-guard. His first thought was: drug overdose, or too much to drink, or both. "What on earth happened to him?"

"It's ghastly, Josh, just perfectly horrible." He paused for a long moment. "Almost . . . almost every bit of flesh has been stripped from his body. There's nothing left but bones. We only identified him by some fragments of his clothes and his wallet."

"Good God. But—but how? What happened?"

"Someone broke into the tomb. We think he must have tried to stop them. And they . . . I don't know, they must have knocked him unconscious. And then . . ."

"Tell me."

"There have been jackals lingering around camp. We think they must have gotten to him while he was still out. Nothing else makes sense."

It took a moment for this to register. He had seen jackals near the camp himself. Why hadn't he driven them away?

"What about the tomb?"

"It's a mess, Josh. Nearly everything important has been stolen, and most of the rest has been broken to pieces. We don't know for sure yet if there's anything left worth bothering with. The inner area—the burial chamber—is still sealed, at least. They started to break in, but it wasn't big enough for a person to get through. They never got to it."

"That's good, at least. Is there anything I can do here? I mean, with the university? Or with his family, maybe?"

"I don't know yet. May I call you?"

"Certainly. Just let me know any way I can help. It's got to be . . . awkward. I'm glad we held off sending out that press release. I mean, if the media get hold of this . . . I can see the stories about 'the Princess's Curse' or something."

"There have been tomb robbers in Egypt for five thousand years."

"That isn't exactly reassuring. What are the authorities saying?"

"You weren't here long enough to get to know the people. It's considered a measure of intelligence never to give a direct answer to a simple question."

"They sound like bureaucrats everywhere."

"We're going to take some time to try to restore some order to the outer chamber. And see if there's anything of value left. We'll hold off opening the burial room till you're able to get back. And till this dies down, I suppose."

"If it dies down. You know the media. It might be best if nothing gets any publicity for now, not even finding the tomb."

"I'll see what I can do. The authorities from the Egyptian Department of Antiquities—"

"If they give you any trouble, mention my name. Better yet, have them contact me."

"I will. But I'm not certain how much you can do. I'm not sure how much anyone can do."

On that uncertain note, they said goodbye. But they were sure to be talking again before long.

A death. There was a curse on the tomb. He found himself unable to let go of the thought. It bothered him all the way across the Atlantic, and the fact he hadn't been able to sleep didn't help. Colin had been an annoying brat, but he certainly didn't deserve that kind of death.

As his flight was approaching Pittsburgh, he knew he couldn't put off speaking with his mother any longer. Inserting his credit card in the slot beside the headrest of the seat in front of him, he released the handset and dialed. Her voice was the last he wanted to hear.

"Hello, Mother."

"Joshua, something terrible has happened."

"You've heard about Colin McKay?"

"Who?"

"Never mind. What happened?" His first thought was for his grandmother; he asked if she was all right.

"My mother-in-law is fine, Joshua."

"Fine?"

"As well as can be expected. They say she'll probably recover."

"That's good. What's wrong, then?"

"Your cousin Henry."

"Hank? What happened?"

"He was in an accident. Apparently he lost control of his car on the parkway somewhere uptown. Why he won't use a chauffeur . . ."

"Never mind that. How is he?"

"They say his blood/alcohol level was nearly twice the legal limit." She lowered her voice to a confidential whisper. "And there were drugs in his system."

"How is he?"

"How should a man be, who behaves like that?"

"Mother, I can't remember the last time I saw you without a martini glass in your hand. What are they saying about Hank?"

"They'll be running tests all day."

"Which hospital?"

She told him. "Room 314."

"My flight should be landing soon. I'll stop to see him on the way home."

"That is more than he would do for you, Joshua. These infernal plays of his—I always have the feeling the rest of us are nothing but props to him."

"He's nobody's fool, Mother. Did you bother to ask what his condition is?"

"Drunk, I imagine."

"He *is* your nephew."

They sparred for another few minutes, then Josh used the impending landing as an excuse to hang up. There wasn't much chance his mother would be very informative about anything but herself. He had seen her throw wild, ranting tantrums because the servants hadn't made the aspic properly.

It seemed the rain was heavier in Pittsburgh than it had been in New York. A car was waiting for him. The driver stepped forward with a huge golf umbrella. He got Josh's luggage, Josh told him to go to St. Zephyrinus, and they hit the road.

Mr. Buechel, Hank's roommate, had not stopped groaning and crying out all night long. Hank rang for the night nurse repeatedly, but after the second time—when she explained that the hospital was full and he couldn't be moved—she simply ignored him.

Then Mr. Buechel made an odd noise in his throat, a kind of rattling gurgle, and his groaning stopped. Hank thanked all the gods of the theater for smiling on him, rolled over, and went to sleep.

Or rather, he tried to. Something was wrong. That sound in his roommate's throat . . .

Irritably, he climbed out of bed and crossed to the man. He was perfectly still. No movement, no breathing. Mr. Buechel had died. He watched for a moment, to be certain. No rise and fall of the man's chest, nothing.

Someone not a theater director might have felt a moment of pity. Not Hank. His only thought was, if I tell them he died, they'll be in here with gurneys and sheets and charts and Christ knows what else, and I'll never get back to sleep. Let them find him in the morning. If they ask, I'll tell them I was asleep, period.

He smiled at his own cleverness, adjusted Mr. Buechel's sheets to look as aesthetically pleasing as possible, then climbed into his own bed. Sleep came quickly.

But it did not last.

Something woke him, the touch of something stroking his face. It was a light touch, not at all alarming, and he told himself it must be a nurse with some gauze to change his dressings. He hoped it wasn't that smart-ass from before.

"Go away."

Whoever it was poked him.

He shifted in his bed. "I said go away, damn it."

Another poke; this one was hard enough to hurt. Angry and frustrated, he sat up in the bed. "Look, nurse, if that's your idea of a bedside manner—"

But it was not a nurse. Hank stared into the face of Mr. Buechel, who had died.

"What the—?"

Mr. Buechel's face was drawn and emaciated. He had been burned quite badly in whatever accident had happened to him. His face had been bandaged, but he had torn the bandages off. Second- and third-degree burns covered him. Bodily fluids seeped. Blood, saliva, mucus oozed.

It took a moment for it to register with Hank what—who—he was seeing. At first he just tried to push the man away. But Mr. Buechel, it seemed, was enormously strong. Hank hit him as hard as he could, but the living-dead man stood and smiled at him and didn't move an inch. Hank looked at his fist, and it was covered with secretions from Mr. Buechel's body.

Finally he was awake enough to realize what was happening. He reached for the signaling device to call for help. Deceased Mr. Buechel pulled it out of his hand, then yanked it from its wall connection.

Hank tried to get out of bed. When the walking corpse lunged at him again, he lost his footing and fell to the floor. Before he could realize it, Mr. Buechel vaulted across the bed and landed on him. The blow knocked the wind out of him, and he gasped to regain his breath.

Then he saw the scalpel in Mr. Buechel's hand. He raised an arm to try and avert it, but it plunged squarely into his throat. Mr. Buechel hacked at this neck and his face again and again, and before long, the pain caused Hank to black out. But his unconsciousness did not deter his dead attacker. The corpse hacked and sawed, until Hank's head was severed almost completely. His blood spilled and spread across the floor; before long nearly the whole floor was covered with it.

Mr. Buechel's corpse walked calmly back to its own bed, crawled in, pulled the sheets up around its throat, and went back to its eternal sleep.

Slowly the gray light of dawn filled the room. No one on the entire floor had heard a thing.

Thirty minutes later, Josh arrived at St. Zephyrinus. He went straight to Hank's ward, only to find a large knot of hospital personnel gathered around the door of the room, and more of them in what looked like a heavy conference at the nurse's station.

He caught a nurse by the arm. "What's wrong?"

"Both patients in 314 are—" She was plump and middle-aged, and she looked like she hadn't had a pleasant day since before adolescence set in. "Who are you?"

Hank explained that one of the patients in that room was his cousin. He showed the nurse his ID.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Brandt. I shouldn't have—"

"It's all right. What happened?"

"Someone got into his room and— We don't know how it happened. Or who it could have been."

"What—?"

An administrator noticed them talking and joined them. "You're Josh Brandt, aren't you? I'm Robert Hillyard. We met at that fundraiser for the Cancer Society last month."

"Yes, of course. I'm here to see my cousin, Hank. He was in that room."

"Oh. I see." He took Josh aside and explained the condition of Hank's body when they found it. "The head was completely severed. I'm sorry. We can't begin to guess how such a thing could have happened."

The news—the shock of it—left him slightly numb. "You've called the police?"

Hillyard dodged the question. "We're launching our own internal investigation."

"If what you told me is accurate, Robert, this was murder. An internal investigation will hardly do."

"We were hoping no one from the family would . . . How did you get here? How did you know?"

Josh explained that he was on the way home from the airport. "I thought I'd stop in and visit him. Hank didn't have much to do with most of our family."

"Well, I—"

"You're not really trying to pull some kind of cover-up, are you? I'm going to have to insist that you call the police immediately, Robert. Or do I have to do it for you?"

"No, no, of course. I was on my way to do it when I saw you." The lie was transparent, but Josh didn't bother to challenge it. The situation was so strange, and it had hit Josh out of nowhere.

"I . . . I have to ask. Was he alive when . . . when his . . ."

"Yes, it appears that he was."

"God. I was going to make arrangements for him to be released. We have a little hospital at the house. I think he would have been happier there, with all kinds of relatives to fight with. Now . . ." He let his voice trail off. He had been closer to Hank than anyone else in the family, which wasn't saying much. But to have him die like this . . . "I want to see him."

"I'm afraid I can't permit that, Josh—Mr. Brandt."

It was time to be firm. "You're already facing one hell of a lawsuit over this. If I were you, I wouldn't piss me off." He put on a tight smile. "Understand?"

He understood. The Brandts were one of the most powerful families in the region. Antagonizing them could only hurt the hospital. And there was the publicity to think about . . . His voice soft and serious, he said, "Come with me."

The room was still soaked in blood, the floor covered with it. From the look of it, it was drying. There were a few footprints in it, from nurses and other staff, Josh imagined. Then it occurred to him to ask, "Are any of those the killer's?"

"We don't think so, no. He must have left quickly, before the blood spread. But, I mean, we just found him—them—a few minutes ago. We're still trying to—"

"Can I go in?"

Hillyard shook his head. "More footprints wouldn't help the investigation."

At the far side of the room, just below the windows, lay Hank's body. It was partially blocked by the bed, but it was slashed, apparently dozens of times. His head was attached to what was left of his neck by one long, thick strand of flesh and muscle. The eyes were open wide. The expression was one of pain and sheer terror.

As he watched, three men in hospital scrubs arrived with a gurney and began to arrange the body so they could lift it. Josh had to look away.

He asked, "What about the other man?"

Again Hillyard shook his head. "We think he died in his sleep. There's not a mark on him."

"That doesn't make sense."

"None of this does, Mr. Brandt."

Josh realized that Hillyard still hadn't called the police. He got out his cell phone and dialed the number of a friend of his, a captain in the homicide unit. "Bill? Josh Brandt. I'm at St. Zephyrinus. There's been a murder here. My cousin Hank . . ." He gave Bill the information he had, which wasn't much, then handed the phone to Hillyard, who was clearly upset that Josh had made the call.

This would cast a considerable pall over Grandmother Violet's birthday celebration. He wasn't at all certain Hank would even have come, but even so . . .

He waited patiently till Hillyard finished talking to Homicide. Then, without saying much more, he left. As he was going, Hillyard dogged him, all the way out to the parking lot.

It was raining heavily again, and neither of them had an umbrella. "Listen, I hope you weren't serious about that lawsuit, Mr. Brandt."

"You actually want to talk about that now?" He couldn't believe the man's nerve and crudity. Even for an officer of a nonprofit, this was crass. "Then, fine, yes, I was serious. You'll be hearing from our lawyers before the day is out. Now, if you'll excuse, me, I'll have to get the news to the rest of my family."

That was that. As his car drove away, Hillyard was still standing in the parking lot, smiling like a robot and trying to look human.

It was 2 A.M. and West 35th Street was deserted. Helena Brandt-Mayes left her office, drawn and exhausted. With her was her paralegal, Jennifer Mandel. For a moment they stood facing one another. "Good night, Jen. Thanks for all the work."

"No prob." She was thinking about all the overtime; her next paycheck would be very nice.

"When I decided to practice law in Manhattan, this isn't exactly the kind of grind I envisioned for myself. I wanted to get to the gym tonight."

Jennifer smiled at her. "You want big money, you put in big hours."

"On West 35th Street." She made a sour face.

"Will you get home all right?"

"I'll get a cab over on Broadway. You okay with taking the subway this late? We can share a cab."

"I'll be fine."

"Oh—you remember I'm off the next two days?"

"Sure. I envy you."

"Don't. I have an ob/gyn checkup tomorrow. Then it's off to Pittsburgh for a family gathering the next day. I wish I'd lied and told them I'd be out of the country or something."

"Eat some pâté for me, okay?"

They said good night and Jennifer walked off toward 8th Avenue. Helena watched her for a moment, then walked in the other direction, toward Broadway. There would be plenty of cabs up on Times Square.

The night air was cool. It had rained most of the day, and the streets were still wet; the streetlights cast that odd orange-yellow glow on them. Her husband was out of town on business. She'd be able to get right to sleep. The thought of having to get up early again the next morning depressed her, and she pushed it out of her mind.

Just as she was approaching Broadway she saw a cab roll by; she tried to hail it, but the driver didn't see her, or didn't want to.

She turned up Broadway towards Times Square. The glow from the millions of lights showed clearly. As she was approaching West 36th another cab rolled by, coming down the street at what seemed an excessively fast clip. She raised her arm to hail it. Then suddenly another car came speeding into the intersection across 36th. The two vehicles approached one another so fast, neither driver had a chance to react. The sound of the collision was deafening, and it echoed along the near-empty streets for what seemed long, long minutes. Then, strangely but inevitably, everything in the world went quiet. Even the dim roar from Times Square, six blocks uptown, seemed to stop.

Helena stood on the sidewalk for a moment, gaping, stunned by what she'd seen. Then she recovered herself, got out her cell phone, and dialed 911. Terrible crash. Broadway at 36th. No, she didn't know how many people might have been involved, but there was no sign of anyone moving. They promised to be there as quickly as possible, and she hung up.

Nothing moved in the wreck but a trickle of some liquid or other, seeping onto the street surface and into the gutter. She hoped it was from one of the cars, not from the people inside. Helena took a step toward the mangled wreckage. There was not the least flicker of movement. She inched closer, cautiously—in movies, car wrecks always exploded.

The driver of the cab was dead. There was no mistaking it. His body was still behind the wheel, but it had been crushed; she could tell it was a human body, and that it had been a white guy, but not much more than that.

There were two bodies in what had been the back seat, a mother and child. They were both battered, bruised, cut, and covered in blood. Neither of them was moving. Helena moved closer to check if they were alive, and said loudly, "Hello?"

Neither of them moved. There was not the smallest trace of movement, not even any sign they were breathing. The sight made her cry. The little boy couldn't have been more than five.

The streets were still empty. Aside from the garish glow from Times Square, there wasn't any sign of anyone or anything human. She had never seen so little traffic. Then a car drove by. The driver craned his neck to see what had happened, then drove away quickly.

The streets, still wet and reflecting the sickly glow of the sodium vapor streetlights, seemed to stretch on forever, with no one but Helena alive and moving and feeling.

She walked to the second car. It was hideously mangled, to the point where there was nothing like a recognizable human corpse in it. Where were the police and the medics? Against all reason, she told herself they might be able to save the child, at least. Light rain began. On the far side of the street she saw a rat scurry along the curb and disappear down a sewer.

The wreckage sat in the intersection, blocking it; another car approached but turned on 34th. A greenish mist began to billow from the cab.

The child, the little boy. She had to check again. If she could save him, help him in any way . . .

His body, like his mother's, was covered in blood. One eye seemed to have been punctured by something. She noticed what she hadn't before, that his hand was still tightly clutching his mother's. If they had been alive and unbloodied, it would have been a perfect portrait of familial love. As it was . . . Helena had to force herself to look.

Through the blood she could see the boy had coppery red hair, very pale white skin, and freckles. He had been dressed in a suit. Adorable kid—he must have been. Now his mouth gaped open and a mixture of blood and some liquid less identifiable poured out of it and stained his chin, his throat, and his shirt.

Where were the goddamned medics? Why had there been no other cars passing? This was midtown Manhattan, for God's sake, and it was only two in the morning.

Suddenly something moved. Helena jumped in alarm. Then she realized it had been the little boy. He was alive. Cautiously, as tenderly as she could, she reached in through the shattered window and touched him. "Are you—can you hear me?" Slowly his body tilted forward and fell to the floor. And she saw that what had moved had been a rat, chewing greedily on the boy's shoulder opposite her.

Helena screamed. The rat was huge, larger than a cat. It glared at her, then turned its attention to the dead mother. It sank its teeth happily into her left breast. Helena picked up a piece of shattered window glass and shied it at the animal. It hissed at her but kept eating.

But then . . . Was she seeing right? Could it be possible? The little boy's eyelids fluttered. She swung at the rat with her purse,

and it hissed at her a second time, but then it seemed to realize she wasn't going to let it dine in peace. It jumped out of the cab and scurried away; in a moment it was down a sewer, safe from her.

Then she noticed a pair of stray dogs on the far corner, watching her and pacing anxiously, as if they knew there might be a meal here but they didn't want to face her. They were odd-looking—lean and long-legged. It occurred to her that, through the thickening green mist, they looked almost like jackals.

Helena reached into the cab and touched the little boy. And quick as a shot, he sat up. His one remaining eye glared at her. His lips curled into a hideous smile. Then his hand darted out and caught hold of hers.

She screamed. She tried to pull free, but his grip was unnaturally strong. He actually started to pull her inside what was left of the cab's back seat. Then his mother, mangled though she was, jumped to life and helped him. Helena struggled with all her strength but the two of them held her down and began beating her, tearing at her clothes and her hair, clawing at her skin.

Through her terror, she became aware that something was moving just outside the cab. Almost as soon as she realized it, those stray dogs leaped in through the window and landed on top of her. They bared their teeth and sank them into her, tearing off and swallowing long strips of her flesh. Though she struggled, the dead boy and his dead mother held her down. The last thought Helena had, and the last thing she felt, was that it was so absurd that she was being eaten alive by feral dogs, and that two dead people were helping them.

When, finally, the emergency crews came, sirens wailing, cherries spinning, the dogs jumped out of the wreckage and disappeared up a nearby service alley.

The police report read that Helena Brandt-Mayes had been killed in a cab she was sharing with Mrs. Arnold Zimmerman and her son Teddy. No one bothered to ask if they had ever known each other. They had been sharing a cab; Manhattanites did that all the time. The bodies had been partially eaten, apparently by wild dogs. The medics had seen a few of them running away as the ambulance pulled up.

CHAPTER 6

Word of Helen's death reached the Brandt family home in Pittsburgh at ten the next morning.

It was the day before Violet's birthday celebration. Ground crews were busily manicuring the lawns, trimming the trees and shrubs; others were at work unrolling a large tent, red-and-yellow striped, on the south lawn, getting ready to put it up.

The word of two deaths in the family had not been sufficient to cancel the party. It was too important an event, socially, politically, professionally. Helena and Hank's immediate families would, of course, not attend; everyone else was still expected.

It had rained steadily since Josh got back to Pittsburgh; this was the first break in the weather, and everyone was anxious to get as much work done as possible. The sky was still overcast, much darker than usual, even for a rainstorm.

Josh and his mother stood at one of the mullioned windows and watched the work. She had a martini. He had long since learned not to bother asking her not to drink so early.

She scowled at the workers. "Look what they're doing to the turf. It isn't possible to get good help anymore."

"Every millionaire, in every B movie ever made, has complained about how hard it is to get good servants anymore. They were doing it in 1930." He smiled a sarcastic smile. "You're giving away your roots."

"My family is the cream of Pittsburgh society, and you know it."

"Not your family roots, your cultural ones."

She took another drink, rather aggressively, as if she thought doing it might hurt him.

He laughed. "At least you could aspire to do Eugene O'Neill and become a proper morphine addict. Drunks are so . . ."

"So . . . what?" She was daring him to say it.

And he did. He had figured out by the time he was fourteen which buttons to push with her. "So common."

But she decided not to take it up. "Anyway, it's supposed to rain again tomorrow. You'll have to move your party indoors. All this is a waste."

"Maybe. But Grandmother is worth a little extra effort."

One of the workmen stepped into a flowering shrub. She gasped exaggeratedly and glared at Josh.

He ignored it. "Nurse Davison says you haven't been to see Violet since her stroke."

"I have not." She said it emphatically. "She always pretended not to know me before it happened. Why should I bother now?"

"Maybe you gave her good reason not to want to know you."

Again she didn't rise to the bait. "Just have lots of champagne, will you?"

"You're giving up gin?"

"I'll never forgive your father for not beating you when you were a boy."

"Just don't make any scenes tomorrow, will you? It'll be over soon enough. I'm going to see Grandmother."

"Do." She left the words "and leave me alone" unspoken; he knew well enough what she meant.

The hospital wing was gloomier than usual, and his footsteps on the threadbare carpet echoed more loudly. For the dozenth time, he told himself to remember to get it replaced.

The guard smiled and said good morning; Nurse Davison did not smile. "She's not doing well today."

"Grandmother or Stephanie?"

"Well, both, I'm afraid. But I meant your grandmother. She keeps having nightmares, then insisting they're real. Monsters around her bed—animals with human heads."

"Maybe she's thinking about city council."

"I don't think she's been sleeping much. In her condition, that isn't good."

"In her condition, is anything good? What does the night nurse say?"

"Not much, I'm afraid, Mr. Brandt. Miss Black doesn't keep very good records." She held out a chart to him. "See? Only the briefest notations."

He smiled gently, trying to assure the nurse that he understood—that he couldn't and wouldn't blame her when the worst happened. Which he knew it would, and sooner rather than later. But she seemed too much on edge to take a point that wasn't made directly.

"See if she's awake, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

The nurse's office was cluttered. Josh wandered to the rack where the family's charts were kept, and wondered whether to blame the mess on Nurse Davison, the night nurse, or both of them.

Idly, he flipped Stephanie's chart open. The doctor had been called for her several times since he left on his trip. There were notes about increased episodes of "glossolalia." He knew the word meant "speaking in tongues." He had heard her spout her confused gibberish often enough before, but . . . "speaking in tongues" hardly seemed the appropriate description.

A moment later, the nurse was back. "Mrs. Brandt says she's not feeling well, so you might as well come and see her."

Josh laughed; Violet must be feeling fairly well. But before he went to her room, he asked Nurse Davison about the notations on Steph's chart.

"She keeps talking in that strange language, sir. More and more. Dr. Merchant even asked a linguist friend of his to stop by and listen to her, and the man said it sounded like a real language, it had all the patterns you'd expect, but it was like none he had ever heard." She seemed uncertain whether to go on, but then she said, "Several of her . . . of her people speak it."

Steph's personalities tended to spook people. They even unsettled Josh now and then. Some of her—or rather, of *their*—behaviors could be so bizarre. He made a mental note to call Merchant and discuss it with him. As he was leaving, he had a quick thought. "Do you know if Dr. Merchant is on the guest list for tomorrow's party?"

"I believe he is, yes, sir."

"Good. When you have a moment, will you please call him and tell him I'll want to take a moment to talk to him about this?"

"Certainly, Mr. Brandt."

"And—do you know anything about drugs?"

"Illegal drugs, sir?"

"No, just the kind you use around here."

"Well, I'm not a pharmacist, but . . . Why do you ask?"

"I'll give you a thousand dollars if you slip some knockout drops into my mother's martini tomorrow."

Nurse Davison didn't seem to know how to react. Josh realized there was no way she could.

"Never mind, Mrs. Davison. It was only a joke."

"I could never joke about a thousand dollars, Mr. Brandt."

"No, of course not."

He walked to the end of the hall and knocked softly on Violet's door. With uncharacteristic vigor, she barked, "Get in here, Joshua."

He laughed and opened the door. She was sitting up in her bed, holding a magazine in one hand. He tried to see what it was, but she pushed it under the sheets.

"It's *Ladies' Home Journal*. Sit down."

He sat. "Why on earth would you want to start reading *Ladies' Home Journal*? Are you looking for tips on window treatments?"

"No, funerals. The cover story is 'Ten Great Ideas for Wakes.'"

"Now, don't talk like that."

"I've got one foot in the grave already, Joshua. The gods of the underworld are waiting to welcome me."

"The last time you said anything about it, you didn't believe in any gods."

"I have the evidence of my own eyes."

"Those monsters you keep dreaming about?"

"They are not dreams."

Violet looked worse than he expected. The left side of her face—the side nearest to him—sagged; she had obviously lost the use of it. And she didn't seem to be using her left hand. Her skin was almost gray, and her eyes were an alarming gray-yellow. She knew what was happening to her only too well. Josh knew better than to try and kid her. "You've always said death didn't hold any horror for you, Violet."

"That was before. Now that I have looked into the face of it . . ."

It was hard for him to tell if she meant this or was being her usual sarcastic self. He tried to keep his voice neutral as he asked, "And what does it look like?"

"You'll know soon enough."

Involuntarily, he laughed. "Are you planning to take me with you?"

"Why should I go alone? *He* has already taught me some of his secrets."

"You talk about death as if it really was a god."

"It is. *He* is. Larger than life and twice as unpleasant. A man with the head of a jackal."

This, more than anything she'd said before, threw him off-guard. "You're talking about Anubis."

Suddenly Violet seemed to lose her energy. "I don't want to talk about it. Not anymore. But I'll tell you something, Joshua." She lowered her voice to a confidential whisper.

"Yes?"

"From the neck down, he has the most beautiful body. More beautiful than any man I've known, and I've known some gorgeous men."

Again he was not certain whether she was being quite serious. "Should I be shocked?"

"Athletes, actors, promising young politicians . . . I've had them all. When your grandfather disappeared, I—the phrase we used to use was 'played the field.'"

Family legend had it that she had once dated Clark Gable and Howard Hughes. Violet had been one of the great beauties of her generation. And she had money. Josh looked at her now, old, broken, half-paralyzed. Death, a lover? The idea struck him as grotesque.

"Barrymore. John Barrymore. And his brother Lionel, too." Violet was retreating slowly, gently, into herself, into her memories, or fantasies, or remembered fantasies. "John was the handsome one, but Lionel was the better lover. Everyone said so, in those days."

Impulsively he took her hand. "You know that I love you, Grandmother."

And suddenly she was herself again. "Then promise me something."

"Anything I can."

"Cancel this damned party tomorrow. Death is waiting. Not on the guest list, but he will be here."

"You know I can't cancel it."

"Ninety years, Josh. Ninety. Decades of the personal being business and of business being personal. Of seeing my private moments printed in the newspapers. Of being required to

attend 'functions' when I wanted to dandle my grandson or cuddle with one of my handsome young gentlemen." She said the word *functions* with terrible distaste. "Please, let my death, at least, be a small, private thing."

"I wish I could. We're Brandts. There's no way around it. We—we and the others like us—we are Pittsburgh. We are society."

"Then society is dying. If you won't do that, promise me one other thing, then."

He was suspicious and didn't try to hide it. Even weak and paralyzed, Violet was sharper than anyone else in his family.

"What do you want?"

"A nurse."

"Mrs. Davison—"

"A male nurse. A handsome, muscular young one. One last lover." She pulled her magazine out from under the sheet. It was *Playgirl*. She pointed to the picture on the cover. "Get me a nurse who looks like this."

Against his will, he laughed. "You are an old witch. Besides, male nurses are all gay."

"That doesn't matter. Our love will be platonic."

"You've rebounded from that deathbed awfully quickly."

"Get me a boy to tend me."

"Get some sleep, Grandmother."

There was a sudden racket from somewhere else in the wing. Someone screamed. Instead of going to see what it was, Josh looked into Violet's eyes.

She smiled a faint little smile. "Your sister. I am not the only one who sees the land of the dead."

"There is no 'land of the dead,' Violet. You taught me so yourself. When I was barely old enough to talk, you took me on your knee and explained to me the difference between all those medieval myths and the real world. You can't expect me to change what I believe now."

"I have seen it, boy. I have seen their bodies, lean beautiful bodies. I have seen the malice in their animal eyes. I have felt their hands caress my withered old flesh. They know I will be theirs soon enough."

He wished she'd stop; he wished she'd run out of energy and fall asleep.

"I'll be a lover of the Great God Death soon enough, Josh. Get me one last living boy to love."

Impulsively he bent down and kissed her on the forehead. "I do believe this is the strangest conversation we've ever had, in a lifetime filled with bizarre talk."

There was more noise from the hall outside. Stephanie was crying out. Josh found himself actually feeling grateful for it. "I should go and see if there's anything I can do."

"Death is her lover too."

Her talk kept getting odder and odder. It must, he told himself, be dementia or something like it. Her stroke . . .

"I'll stop by later, Grandmother."

"Cancel the party, Joshua."

"Now, you know I can't."

"I'll pretend to have another stroke. Better yet, I'll pretend to be mad and say horrible things in front of the guests. I'll urinate in the fruit punch."

"If you think making yourself into a public embarrassment will help things, go ahead." He reached across the bed and took her magazine. Thumbing though it, he laughed. "At your age."

"The need for loving never stops, Joshua. Not even with death."

He put the magazine on her nightstand, squeezed her hand, and turned to go. But just as he reached the door she said, loudly and firmly, "I appreciate your consideration in not telling me about your cousins. But there was no need."

He stopped in mid-step with his hand on the doorknob. "My cousins?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. Helena and Hank. Both dead, both in horrible ways. You thought keeping word from me would be kind."

"I don't—"

"I have seen them, Josh. In the realm of the dead. Half of me lives there now, and I have seen them. They are waiting for me to die and join them, in exactly the same way as all my living relations."

"Grandmother, I—"

"The dead know, Joshua. But they are powerless. Or they have been, until . . ."

"Until?"

"Until our family. First my poor foolish husband, then my even more foolish son, and now you. You have opened doorways, all of you."

He was completely lost. It must be dementia; it couldn't be anything else. "I'll stop by later, Violet."

Outside in the hallway, Nurse Davison was just coming out of Stephanie's room, with the guard just behind her. She rearranged her uniform rather self-consciously. "You heard?"

"Yes, I did. We did. How bad was it?"

"I'm calling the doctor. She's getting worse. These episodes . . . They're more than I can deal with."

"Do whatever needs to be done. Can I see her?"

"I've sedated her. She should be all right in a few minutes."

"Good, I'll wait. Meantime, let's talk to the doctor."

They went back to her office, and he made the call. Dr. Merchant gave her what seemed to be fairly elaborate instructions, then she handed the phone to Josh.

"Doctor? Mrs. Davison says she's getting worse."

"You should consider moving her someplace . . . private, Josh."

He didn't sound like he wanted to be having this conversation. Josh got the impression he had something else on his mind.

"This house is more private than anyplace I know, doctor."

"You know what I mean. From the note you made on Mrs. Davison's chart, Stephanie has added a new personality. That isn't a good sign." He added, with emphasis, "Not at all."

"We'll discuss it tomorrow. You are planning to come to Grandmother's party, I hope."

"Yes, of course." He sounded embarrassed, as if he'd forgotten all about it but didn't want to say so.

"Good, we'll talk then. Do you have anything else to go over with Mrs. Davison?"

"No. Till tomorrow, then."

Josh hung up and turned to the nurse. "Will Steph be out for a while? I'd like to talk to her."

"She should be. If you come back in a few hours . . ."

Just then, Stephanie appeared at the office door. She was, to all appearances, not even drowsy, let alone "out." "If you come back in a few hours, it will be later than it is now. And it is already too late."

"Steph!"

Mrs. Davison did an elaborate double-take. "Miss Brandt!"

She showed not the least sign of grogginess, and there was no indication she'd run mad just a few minutes before. She smiled her most fetching smile, tossed her hair, and said, "Stephanie is asleep. The drug put her out. But no one drugged me. I'm Alice. You remember me, don't you?"

Alice—she had been the first of Stephanie's alternate personalities to appear, years earlier. And she was the one who was "there" most often when Stephanie wasn't. Unlike Steph, or rather, unlike Steph at her best, Alice was often humorless, unironic, dull. But she was more reasonable than some of the others.

Josh made himself smile. "Hello, Alice."

Mrs. Davison seemed not quite to know what to do. "Should I—should I leave the two of you alone, sir?"

Stephanie/Alice answered for him. "We'll go back to my room and talk. Is that all right with you, Joshua?"

He nodded to Mrs. Davison and followed "Alice" out into the hall.

She looked back over her shoulder at him. "I really wish Stephanie would stop all these dramatics. The rest of us get so embarrassed by her."

"I'm sure she can't help it." He moved in front of her and got the door.

"And this new one. She's so arrogant. None of us can understand a word she says. She talks in that weird language."

Josh sat on the edge of the bed and gestured her to a comfy chair. "Tell me about the new one, will you?"

Alice went to the nightstand and poured herself a glass of water. "She says she's a princess. At least that's what we all think. Everything she says is gibberish."

"A foreign language?"

She shrugged. "You've heard it. Does it sound like any language you've ever heard?"

"I can't say it does, no."

Alice sashayed around the bed and planted herself right in front of Josh. He braced himself; he knew all too well what was coming.

Coquettishly she asked him, "You want to make it?"

He made himself firm. "You know the answer to that."

"Hope springs eternal." She laughed and sat down.

"I wish you'd stop trying."

"You're cute."

"And I'm your brother."

"You're Stephanie's brother, not mine."

"Even so."

Suddenly she began to tremble. Her eyelids fluttered wildly, as if she was having a mild seizure of some kind. Josh had seen it before, more often than he'd have liked, so he knew what was happening.

Stephanie changed. She was not Alice anymore. Her body language stiffened; her posture became erect. She looked around the room wildly, as if it was the strangest thing she'd ever seen. For an instant she glared at Josh, as if the odd surroundings might be his doing. Then she seemed to decide he didn't matter.

"Steph?"

She paid him no attention. Instead she went to the windows and began pressing her hands against them, as if glass was a thing she'd never seen before.

"Stephanie, you're going to hurt yourself."

She rounded on him violently and screamed something unintelligible.

"Stephanie, stop it!"

She went back to the door, still screaming, and pounded on it, as if the simple mechanism for opening it was beyond her ability to comprehend.

Josh moved quickly behind her and put his arms around her, to restrain her. She fought him, and she was impossibly strong. She broke free of his hold and pushed him to the floor. Screaming in her mad language, she pounded the door again.

Nurse Davison opened it and stood squarely in front of her. By the time Josh got back to his feet, the two of them were struggling. The guard came running, and the three of them managed to get control of her. They carried her to her bed and strapped her down. All the time she was crying and babbling in that strange language. It sounded vaguely familiar to Josh, but he couldn't place it at all. She fought wildly against the straps.

The guard stepped back away from the bed and exhaled deeply. "She's getting stronger."

Josh watched his sister. Or rather, his sister's body with someone else's personality occupying it. It was a thing he'd never get quite used to, and he knew it. He asked Mrs. Davison if she should give Stephanie another shot of sedative.

"No, sir, there's a full dose in her system now. More might—"

"But it isn't doing any good."

"I can't increase the dosage without a doctor's orders, Mr. Brandt. Surely you understand that."

"Yes, of course." He paused and caught his breath. "So that is the new personality."

She nodded. "Perhaps Stephanie will come back and sleep soon."

"We have to hope."

It occurred to him that the noise of the struggle might have disturbed Violet. He went back to her room and looked in, but she was sound asleep.

There were things to do. He had to oversee the elaborate preparations for the party. The tent had to be inspected, chairs arranged. He had to have his secretary confirm with the caterers that all the food would be prepared and delivered on time. The music had to be gone over with the string quartet. And there were some details about the guest list that needed his attention, some last minute additions.

So his sense of duty took him away from the hospital wing. If he had stayed, if he had sat by Stephanie's bed for a time, he would have heard her mutter more in that odd language. And one word, at least, he would have recognized: Ankh-es-en-Amun.

CHAPTER 7

Stephanie was quiet the rest of the day. Josh checked back periodically, hoping she'd be herself. But she was Alice for most of the afternoon, and she kept coming on to him. He always avoided her when she was like that. At other times, she was this new "princess."

Then, around dinnertime, she became Robin, a ten-year-old boy. Robin was a frightened child, the victim of horrific abuse, so terrible he was never able to communicate what had happened to him. He cried constantly; he trembled when anyone came near him. It was impossible not to feel sorry for him, his pain was so intense and irrational.

Dr. Merchant had explained that Robin was the personality Stephanie's mind had created to hold all the pain and terror of her own life. But a clinical detail like that didn't make the child any easier to confront. Josh always avoided Stephanie when little Robin was occupying her, as he did with Alice, though hardly for the same reason.

He wanted her to be herself the next day; he wanted her to be at the party for Violet, and to be herself long enough to enjoy it. But there was no way of knowing what would happen. Which of her personalities would come to the fore at any given time was a mystery, determined by the arcane calculus of her inner mind and not susceptible to anything from the external world.

Once, he looked into her room. And Robin was curled up in one corner of the bed, crying madly like the frightened child he was.

Mrs. Davison was just leaving at the end of her shift. Josh peered at Robin through a crack of the door; opening it too much—actually appearing there—would only make the boy more painfully afraid.

Mrs. Davison tapped Josh's shoulder lightly. "I'll be leaving now, Mr. Brandt."

"Miss Black is here?"

She nodded. "They've revised the weather forecast. It sounds like you'll have beautiful weather for the party tomorrow."

"I hope so."

"Everyone should have a lovely time."

"You won't be here?"

"It's my day off. Miss Black's on duty tomorrow." She smiled, a bit shamefacedly. "She promised to save me a piece of cake."

Josh glanced into his sister's room once again. "She's still Robin."

"The saddest of her people."

"What can have happened to cause so much pain?"

Mrs. Davison looked away from him. "There are so many things. Families. The world . . ."

"Yes." The word *families* hit him like a sledgehammer. Could we, he wondered, have done this to her? "Yes, just so, Mrs. Davison. Have a good day off."

"Thank you, sir."

She left. Josh closed the door gently, so as not to disturb the pained creature inside. Then, on impulse, he opened it again to take one last look.

Robin/Stephanie was sitting up on the bed, quite erect, staring back at him. She trembled, her eyes seemed to go blank, her body language changed, and she was someone else.

It was the new personality again. She sat on the bed, erect and imperious, glaring at him, and said something in the language only she understood. But this time she wasn't mad

or angry. She was perfectly calm as she said whatever it was, as if he was a servant and she was giving him an order.

The sun was brilliant the next day, more blindingly bright than Josh had seen it—in Pittsburgh—for months. It made the landscape's colors deep and vivid. The lawn and the shrubbery were the most astonishing green, flowers seemed almost to glow, and black shadows brought everything into sharp relief. The yellow and red of the party pavilion were almost painful in their richness.

For a brief moment, as Josh watched it from his bedroom window, he found himself thinking that this was what the sun looked like over Egypt, over the valleys where the ancient dead were buried. But it was a foolish thought, and he knew it. Pittsburgh was Pittsburgh, and that was that. Any attempt to make it feel more exotic than it actually was would be . . . well, fanciful, at best.

He showered, dressed, and went down to breakfast. Cook had prepared something simple, ham and eggs, cinnamon toast, coffee. She made the best coffee. He poured himself a second cup and savored it.

A moment later his mother came in, still in her dressing gown. She looked hung-over, and she probably was. Her hair was uncombed, and the bags under her eyes were even more noticeable than usual. There was no point hoping she'd relax and enjoy the party and the company. She was going to make it as unpleasant for him as she could, and he knew it.

Without glancing at him, she sat down and took a slice of toast.

"Morning, Mother." He made his tone as annoyingly cheery as he could.

"Your sister is here."

He looked around. "Steph? Where?"

"Louise and that man she married."

"Ari."

"Yes. Him. They showed up at midnight and demanded to be put up."

"They were invited. And they *are* family. She *is* your daughter."

"Only because there's nothing I can do about it."

Josh didn't much like his older sister Louise, but his mother liked her even less, which made her okay with him. In his mother's eyes she'd had the enormously bad taste to marry a Jewish man. Not even the fact that he had more money than the Brandts made him acceptable.

He sipped his coffee. "Are they coming down to breakfast?"

"It's free, isn't it? These eggs are runny."

She had complained about the breakfast eggs every morning for as long as he could remember. "So what?"

"I expect Cook to make my breakfast properly. We pay her enough. When are you going to fire her and find a decent one?"

He was in no mood for this conversation. He pushed his chair out, stood up, and laid his napkin on the table. "I'm going to see Grandmother."

"You are determined to go through with today's farce?"

"I'm afraid I don't see it that way, Mother."

"A birthday party for a half-senile harpy. I imagine she won't even know where she is or what's happening."

"Violet is not senile, and you know it perfectly well. Even drunk on painkillers, she's sharper than you are when you're stone sober." He hesitated, then added, "Not that that happens much."

She started to say something, but he didn't stop to listen.

The hospital wing was dark, cool, and quiet; the light from outside seemed to be coming from another world. He poked

his head in through Violet's door, but she was sleeping. A moment later he checked on Steph, but she was asleep too.

Outside, the crew was putting the finishing touches on the preparations. A groundsman was checking the tent lines to make sure they had enough tension. A few others were manicuring the lawn and the flowering shrubs; he'd given them careful orders to make certain everything looked perfect for his grandmother's party.

The grass was damp. With luck, the sun would dry it quickly, before the guests arrived. It wouldn't do to have one of them slip and hurt himself.

Inside the pavilion, it was already getting hot from the sunlight. He asked still another groundsman to turn on the air conditioning; no sense having early guests uncomfortable. The caterers were beginning to lay out food for the event, with help from the kitchen staff. The centerpiece was a huge, elaborate birthday cake. Violet liked chocolate with butter-cream icing; he double-checked to make certain that's what it was.

The sun was halfway up the sky by the time he had satisfied himself about everything. There were a few puffy cumulus clouds. It was gorgeous, just perfectly gorgeous; he couldn't have asked for better weather.

Then he saw Violet, watching him from her window. When she realized he had noticed her, she hid. Shaking his head at the pointlessness of it, he headed for the hospital wing again.

"Violet?"

When he got there, she pretended to be asleep again.

"There's no point to that, really. We both know perfectly well you're up."

She didn't move.

"Violet, for God's sake, the guests will start arriving by noon."

She opened her eyes. "Let them."

"I tasted the icing on the cake. Cook has outdone herself."

"Really? And the cake's chocolate?"

"Of course."

She made a sour face. "When I was a little girl, they always made my birthday cakes yellow. I hated them. There is simply no excuse for yellow cake. It has no reason to exist."

"Like disagreeable old women. Come on, get up. Have you decided what you're wearing?"

"Something black. For Death, my soon-to-be lover."

"For God's sake, stop it. You're good for years."

"Rubbish. You pick out something for me. Something not too young, mind you. I'll feel foolish enough as it is."

He went to her clothes closet, which was a large walk-in. "Here. This dove-gray gown."

"No. I'm too old to be a dove. Do you have anything for a dead duck?"

"I wish you'd stop that." He sighed and gave her a stern look. "You're eternal. Like the pyramids."

"I should think, Joshua, that you of all people should understand the connection between Egypt and mortality. Our family has lost enough men there."

"I came back alive, didn't I?" He took a dress off its hanger. "Here. Lavender trimmed with blue lace. It's perfect for you."

"Good. They can make my shroud out of it."

"Violet, will you stop?"

"Tell whichever one of my keepers on duty that I'm ready for breakfast, will you? Or do you want to stay and see me undress?"

She was obviously going to be as difficult as she could manage. There were times he thought she and his mother deserved one another. Shaking his head over it, Josh headed to the nurse's office. Miss Black was just coming back on duty; he asked her to order Violet's breakfast. "Nothing too heavy or too filling, okay? I want her hungry for the party."

He checked on Stephanie again, but she was still asleep. It was probably just as well, he decided.

Everything was ready. He went over it all in his head time and again, but there was nothing he had forgotten and nothing he hadn't checked on. His watch said 10:45. The guests were due at noon. A hot bath would be good; it would help him relax. He started to head for his rooms when, on impulse, he decided to take one last look at the lawn and the pavilion.

There were more clouds now, darker clouds than before. Just as he opened the door and stepped outside, one of them crossed the sun. It was just as well; clouds would keep the day from getting too hot. He only hoped there wouldn't be rain. There seemed to be a breeze kicking up.

Then, at the far end of the lawn, by the main gate, he thought he saw something odd. The gate was wide open, which it shouldn't have been, not yet. And there was someone standing just inside it, not moving, apparently staring at the house. Josh's first thought was that it must be one of the guests, confused about the time on the invitation. But there was something . . . he couldn't quite put his finger on it, but . . .

The sun came out again, blindingly bright. The figure did not move. A tall, thin, elegant figure in a floor-length gown which blew gently in the breeze. Wearing a tall fez. It looked like . . . no, it couldn't be.

Josh shaded his eyes. It looked like . . . No, that was impossible.

It was Ardath Bey. He knew it. Even at a distance of nearly fifty yards, he was unmistakable.

A dozen conflicting things raced through Josh's mind. No, it wasn't him, it couldn't be. It was. It had to be. He couldn't be here. He was.

He stood motionless, exactly as he had in the Valley of the Queens, watching the house.

Ardath Bey.

How could he be there? How could he have come from Egypt and found this house? *Why?* There was no possibility he intended anything good. The unnaturally bright sunlight made the scene and the robed figure seem slightly unreal.

Josh decided to confront him. The man clearly had no business here.

Just as he was setting off toward the gate, he heard voices behind him. "Josh! There you are!"

"Hey, bro!"

It was Louise and Ari. They sounded pleased to see him, but there was something else in their voices, too.

"Lou, Ari, it's great to see you both." He kissed Louise on the cheek and shook Ari's hand.

"You too." Ari looked faintly worried. Josh suspected Louise was, too, even more so. She was smiling, but it looked forced. Being one of the Brandt women, Louise was not letting her face betray any emotion she might actually be feeling.

"Listen, there's something I have to tend to. I'll be right back, okay?"

"Josh, we think there might be something wrong."

He looked anxiously down the lawn. "Look, the gate's open and there's a trespasser. I'll be back in a minute, okay?"

But Ari put a hand on his shoulder and forced him to pay attention to them. "Josh, the kids are missing."

This stopped him. "What?"

"They were supposed to fly in this morning, but there's no sign of them."

He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the gate. It was properly shut, and there was no sign of Ardath Bey. It threw him off balance almost as much as the sight of the man had done. "I'm . . . I'm sorry . . . what was that?"

"They were flying in together. You know how Tom loves his Piper Cub. We couldn't get them to come on a commercial flight with us."

"When . . ." He looked back at the gate again; there was nothing out of the ordinary. "When were they due in?"

Louise planted herself directly in front of him. "The flight plan Tom filed said they'd be getting here around eight in the morning."

"God. The luck this family's been having. Er, I mean, I'm sure they're all right. They just stopped somewhere, that's all."

She took him by the arm. "What do you mean about the family's luck?"

"Well . . . there have been some accidents." They hadn't heard about Hank or Helena and the grotesque deaths they had died. He told them as much as he knew.

Ari and Louise looked at one another. Even Louise couldn't disguise the deep concern she was feeling. "What happened to Hank . . . that doesn't sound like any accident."

"He lost control of his car."

"But at the hospital . . . his . . . his head . . ." She turned pale, almost white.

Josh decided it had been a mistake to tell them about their cousins' deaths; they had their own worries. There would have been questions later, at the party, but . . . but what was done was done. The job now was to try and track down Tom and his sister Theo.

"Come on. Let's get inside and get on the phone."

They started to go in, but something made him hesitate. "Listen, I'll be right in, all right? I promise. I just want to go down and check on the gate."

"Can't security do that?"

Not with this particular interloper, he told himself. "I need to put my mind at rest. We're going to have a lot of important guests

today, and . . ." It sounded lame and he knew it. But he had seen Ardath Bey; he was certain of it. And the man was . . . was . . . Josh decided "dangerous" might be too strong a word. But Ardath Bey was no one he wanted on his estate, especially not today.

Louise seemed not to know what to make of it. "You'll come right in, then?"

"Promise."

They went inside. Josh headed down the lawn to the gate. It was locked, quite solidly. He shook it a few times to make sure.

Tom Bowers, the security chief, appeared. "Morning, Mr. Brandt. Everything okay?"

"The gate was open a few moments ago, I saw a man standing here."

"No sir, I don't think so. I've been doing my rounds all morning, careful like, and nobody's been in here. We do get tramps and vagrants now and then, but—"

"I saw him. I know I did."

Tom wasn't sure what to say. But Josh was the boss. "Well, you can see it's locked now, sir. I'll keep an eye on it, just to be sure."

"Thanks. I've got to get back up to the house." He turned to go.

"Sir?"

"What?"

"What time should we open the gates for the guests?"

Damn. If Ardath Bey were to appear again, at the party, and . . . Josh checked his watch. "I guess 11:30 should be about right. I can't imagine any of them will have the poor form to show up any earlier than that. But there's someone I want you to watch out for."

"Who's that, sir?"

"A tall, thin man in an Egyptian-style robe. And a fez, you know, one of those hats like a half-cone—like the Shriners wear? If you see him trying to get in, don't let him. And come and get me right away."

"I'll tell my whole crew."

"Yeah, do that. I really have to get up to the house now, okay?"

"Don't worry, sir, I'll spread the word. If the guy shows up here, he won't get in."

Back at the house, Josh managed to use his company's contacts to get in touch with an official at LAX. There was no news. The only thing he was able to say with certainty was that they had delayed their takeoff the previous night by more than an hour.

"Do you know why?" Josh did the talking; Lou and Ari listened anxiously on an extension.

"Let me check. I'll be right back."

Louise waved a hand at Josh to get his attention. "Tell him to hurry up, will you?"

But it was too late; the man was gone, off to check the records. Then a moment later they heard his voice again. "Mr. Brandt?"

"Yes, what have you found?"

"Apparently they held back their flight by an hour and a half."

"Any indication why?"

"Apparently it was to do a favor for a friend." They heard someone talking to him in the background, then he added, "My assistant says it was a classmate of Tom's."

"He wanted to fly east with them?"

"No, sir. Apparently there had been a death in his family. His father, who was in L.A. on business. He asked Tom to fly

the casket back east with him. According to the flight plan, they were to take it to Boston."

"I see. And you've checked with the people at Logan?"

"Yes, sir. They never arrived."

"And that's all you know?"

"I'm afraid so. If you'll give me your number, I can call you as soon as there's any news."

Josh gave it to him. "That's a private number, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The call had done nothing to relieve the tension. Louise was, if anything, more upset than she'd been before. "Why on earth would they agree to carry a corpse with them? The airlines know all the procedures for doing that."

Josh found it odd, too. But he was, for better or worse, the unofficial head of the family, or at least of his generation of Brandts. He tried his best to sound calm and confident. "It was for a friend, Lou. I'd have done the same thing." He wasn't at all certain that he would have, but he made it sound convincing.

Ari put an arm around her. "Listen, why don't we try to get a bit of rest before the party starts? Josh will let us know the minute there's any news." He looked to Josh, who picked up on his cue.

"Sure I will. You know I will."

Relief, however slight, showed in Ari's face. "There have to be some sedatives around here."

Josh nodded. "Mother takes them all the time. I'll have Nurse Black bring you two."

They thanked him and headed upstairs to their bedroom. A few moments later Josh went to his own room. It was going to be a more difficult day than he'd expected. That hot bath would help. But just as he was starting to undress, there was a knock at his door.

It was Ari. "Thanks for taking charge, Josh. She's been a wreck all morning. It's everything I can do to keep her calm."

"No problem, Ari. She's my big sister. But how are *you* holding up under this?"

"Well, I guess okay. I mean, we both know they're kids and they probably just stopped to play someplace, or they had to stop for a quick repair, or . . ." He looked at Josh, and he was suddenly quite shamefaced. "I've told myself that so many times, you'd think I'd start to believe it, wouldn't you?"

"They'll be fine, Ari. I'm sure it's just what you said. Or something even dumber."

"I hope you're right." He looked away from Josh, apparently embarrassed, then back at him. "I can't tell you how I love those kids."

"They'll be fine."

"With this other stuff, about Helena and Hank . . . I mean, what can I think?"

"You want a drink?" He opened his dresser drawer and got out a fifth of bottled-in-bond.

"No thanks. Yes. No. Shit. I better get back to her." He thanked Josh again and headed quickly down the hall.

The conversation had unsettled Josh more than he realized. He uncorked the bottle and took a deep drink. From his window he could see the front lawn and the pavilion for the party. Please, he whispered to himself, please let the day pass without any more unpleasantness.

He showered, which helped relax him. He had another drink, which helped more. At 11:15, he decided to stop in and see Violet, then give the preparations another quick check.

Violet was wearing the dress he'd picked out. She was sitting up in her easy chair, fast asleep. It would be a long afternoon for her; he decided to let her rest. One strand of her hair was out of place; he fixed it gently, without waking her. And he made a mental note to keep an eye on her; if she started to

show any signs of stress or fatigue, he'd make excuses to the guests and get her back to her room.

As he was passing Stephanie's room, he heard a strange voice, much deeper than hers. After a moment, he realized it was Stephanie, talking with Roger's voice, the last of her personalities to develop before the new, strange one. Roger was a priest; Josh always found him especially unlikable.

He couldn't resist knocking and putting his head in the door. "Stephanie?"

Roger, arrogant as any priest, retorted that he was the only one in the room.

"Well, listen, you know we're having this party for Grandmother Violet. We're all hoping Stephanie will be able to put in an appearance."

"Your grandmother does not like me."

"No, but she loves Stephanie. Try and have her ready for the party, will you?"

Roger glared; Josh left. This business of multiple personalities seemed so strange to him, even after all these years. There were times when Stephanie seemed able to call forth any one of them she wanted. At other times, she seemed to have no control at all. That seemed especially to be the case when Robin, the hurt little boy, came to the fore. But all the personalities knew each other; there were times when Josh had the impression they carried on conversations among themselves.

Stephanie had never been well, not emotionally and psychologically. She had been a frail girl, and she had grown into an even more frail woman. Josh supposed it made a kind of sense that she had developed her own, interior society. In a way, he even envied her for it. What better way not to have to deal with the real one?

He hoped today was one of the times when she could control which personality emerged; he very much wanted

her to come to the party, to have a pleasant time. She had so few of them.

It was past 11:30. The first guests would be arriving soon. Josh had an impulse to find his mother and see how drunk she was. It was probably too much to hope that she'd stay relatively sober and well-behaved, but . . .

There was no sign of her. It wouldn't have surprised him if she'd simply left, to avoid the party. But one of the maids told him she was showering; as far as she was aware, she told him, Mrs. Brandt was planning to attend. He hoped she knew what she was talking about.

CHAPTER 8

At 11:45 the first guests arrived. Not to Josh's surprise, it was a party of three city councilmen—two lawyers and the owner of a string of Laundromats—all traveling together to save gas even though they didn't like each other very much. He put on his heartiest grin and went out to meet them.

"Good morning. Thanks so much for coming."

They all made deferential little comments about how they wouldn't have missed it for the world, and so on. Josh escorted them to the tent, left them at the table with the hors d'oeuvres, and crossed to the musicians. "It looks like people are starting to arrive."

They began a lively quartet. Josh thought it was Mozart, then glanced at the sheet music and saw that it was Haydn. He stepped outside again and looked to the gate. It had to have been Ardath Bey he saw there, yet it couldn't have been. Trick of the light, maybe? Overactive imagination, combined with all the day's stress to play games with his imagination? Whoever he had seen, if it really had been anyone at all, was gone.

More guests arrived, some business executives, almost-but-not-quite CEOs, and their wives. Just behind them the bishop's limo pulled up. He was in full clerical garb, flowing red satin gown with matching hat. He headed straight for the bar.

Josh checked his watch. It was exactly noon.

So far, he was the only member of the family there. As another dozen guests appeared, he sent one of the maids up to the

house to get the rest of them. Family no-shows would not look good.

The quartet finished their first movement and went into a waltz, quite a lively one. As soon as his mother and Louise showed up, he'd head up to the house himself to bring Violet.

Then, from behind him, he heard a friendly voice. "Josh! Great to see you!"

It was Jim Huntingdon, a cousin on his mother's side. They had played together when they were kids; and Jim now worked for Brandt Industries.

"Jim! God, it's great to see you!" He meant it. "But what on earth are you doing in Pittsburgh?"

Jim looked slightly sheepish. "I had your mother put me on the guest list. I wanted to surprise you."

"Well, you have."

"I heard you were in Egypt recently. Should I be offended that you didn't stop at Amman to see me?" He was head of their Middle East operations.

"Oh, I was just there playing. You know, the family archaeology bug has bitten me."

Jim laughed. "What is it with you people? You should try living in that part of the world. You'd be surprised how fast you lose any interest in ruins."

"Don't let Mother hear you say that. She'd take it personally."

Jim looked around the tent. "I don't see her. Isn't she coming?"

"She does what she wants to, family be damned." Josh shrugged and looked Jim up and down again. "You're looking fantastic. I can't tell you how happy I am you're here." He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "It's so great to have someone who isn't after money or access." He looked around the tent. "And isn't drunk."

"Give me an hour or two." Jim laughed. "And how *is* your dear, sweet Mother?"

"Just as dear and sweet as always."

"As bad as that?" He laughed. "How do you put up with her?"

"I have the patience of a saint. And I have my own wing of the house. Where are you staying?"

"The Hilton."

"You'll have to move your things here, while you're in town. And you can use one of the cars."

"Thanks, but I've got a business associate staying down there, too. I don't think he'd want to impose. You should meet him."

"One of our people?"

"No, actually he's an Egyptian. Quite a useful business connection. And filthy rich, too. Name's Ardath Bey."

Josh froze. And Jim couldn't help noticing.

"You know him?"

"I met him in Egypt, actually. I can't say he's anyone I'd—"

"He couldn't be more eager to do business with us, Josh. And like I said, he's got money and connections."

Yes, Josh thought, and he's got something else, too. He must have manipulated Jim into bringing him to Pittsburgh on some pretext or other. Did that mean it really was Ardath Bey whom Josh had seen earlier? He did not want the man here. Not at all.

Seeing how unhappy Josh looked, Jim went on. "I'm afraid—I'm afraid I brought him here today. I hope that wasn't wrong."

"No." Josh knew he wasn't being very convincing. "No, it's not a problem. I—I haven't seen him at the party. And he does kind of stand out. Where can he be?"

Jim scanned the crowd. "Now that you say it, I've lost track of him completely. He must be off someplace, buying a politician or something. I should have checked with you before I brought him. I'm sorry, Josh."

"No, it's okay. I guess. Just do me a favor and find him, will you? And keep an eye on him?"

"What—?"

"Nothing. It's nothing. Just me being paranoid. But keep an eye on him, okay?"

"Sure, Josh." He was obviously puzzled. "I'll go and find him right now. You want to talk to him?"

"No!" He said it so emphatically, Jim knew there was something seriously wrong. But he knew better than to try and press the issue.

"I'll go and find him, okay?"

"Please."

There were more clouds: darker, heavier ones. Josh closed his eyes and offered a vague, quick prayer, directed to no one in particular, for the rain to hold off. Jim disappeared into the crowd.

Then, looking like a rain cloud herself, Josh's mother came out of the house and walked toward the pavilion. Partly bored, partly looking like she wanted to be anywhere else in the world, she was not smiling like a good hostess. Josh found himself thinking that if Ardath Bey were really to show up here today, she could frighten him off without even trying.

"Mother."

"Hello, Joshua. Is the bar well stocked?"

"Right out of your private supply."

"That is not funny."

"It wasn't mean to be. You're wearing black. This isn't a funeral."

She put on an artificial smile. "Violet will be dead soon enough. I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone."

His cell phone rang. He knew it would be bad form to answer it in front of the guests. But he checked to see who it was, and he decided he had to take the call. It was the guy from LAX. As discreetly as he could, he stepped outside the tent and walked around to the back of it, hoping no one would see him.

"Mr. Brandt?"

"Yes. What's the news?"

"Not good, I'm afraid. I'm sorry to have to tell you, your nephew and niece's plane went down in the mountains just outside Wheeling, West Virginia."

This was terrible news. The fact that it came in the middle of Violet's party made it even worse. He dreaded having to tell Lou and Ari. "What happened?"

"We're not sure yet. The wreckage was only found about ten minutes ago. Investigators will get there as soon as possible."

"You'll let me know right away?"

"Yes, sir." The man hesitated, as if he wasn't sure he should say what he knew. "There is one really strange thing, though."

The day was getting worse and worse. Josh closed his eyes and braced himself. "Yes?"

"Well . . . the corpse they were flying back east?"

"What about it?"

"It's the weirdest thing. I mean, freakish things happen in air crashes. You never know what to expect. But this . . ."

"Will you for God's sake tell me what happened?"

The man paused again. "Well, your niece and nephew were found in the pilot and passenger seats."

"Go on."

"The corpse was found . . . with its hands around their throats."

Josh wished he had a strong drink. "But . . . but . . . that can't be possible."

"Like I said, sir, some really odd things happen when planes crash. I could tell you stories—"

"Please don't."

"Sorry. I hope I didn't speak out of line. The investigators—"

"No, no, I did ask. You'll get back in touch when you know more?"

"As soon as I know, you'll know."

"Thank you for calling me."

Josh had barely known his sister's children. But they had always liked him, he had always liked them, and they had always been good kids—at least, good for children of the wealthy. When he thought of the trouble he got into at their age . . . Poor things, to have died like that in a plane crash. The impact must have thrown open the coffin, he told himself, and positioned the bodies in that weird way. There was no other explanation.

He'd have to tell Ari and Louise right away, of course. He walked back into the party pavilion to see if they had shown. There was no sign of them. But the number of guests seemed to have doubled. Josh dutifully played host and greeted them all, though his heart wasn't in it.

He caught the headwaiter's eye. "Listen, I have to go up to the house for a moment. Keep an eye on things here. Make my apologies to any guests who come while I'm gone."

The party was going well, to all appearances. People were eating, drinking, conversing, all seemingly enjoying themselves. Josh hoped he wouldn't be missed for a few moments.

Just as he was entering the house, Nurse Black approached him from the hospital wing. "Mr. Brandt."

"Yes?"

She crossed to him through the foyer of the mansion. "I'm afraid . . . I'm very sorry, sir, but Mrs. Brandt has passed away."

"My grandmother?"

She nodded. "I knew you'd be coming to get her for the party, so I went to check and make sure she was awake. When I got there . . ."

Josh went numb. His beloved grandmother, the one source of honesty and stability in his life, was gone. The party might

have been a million miles away. "Did she . . . did she . . . how did she die?"

"I think she went peacefully, in her sleep. She was sitting up in her favorite chair, all dressed for the party."

"That's good, at least." He closed his eyes and tried to picture her as he had last seen her. Serene, seemingly at peace. He hoped she really was.

"I . . . er . . . thank you, nurse."

"We'll need a doctor for the death certificate."

"Dr. Merchant is at the party. I'll get him. But I think I need to sit down for a moment, first."

"Let me get him, Mr. Brandt. You sit here and rest, all right?"

She left. He sat down heavily in a plush chair and buried his face in his hands. When he looked up again, his mother was standing over him. As usual, she had a drink.

"She's gone." His voice was flat.

"Who? Joshua, you can be so vague, sometimes."

"Violet. She's dead."

"Nonsense. She's never going to die. It would please too many of us."

He spat out the words. "Go away and leave me alone."

"Really, Joshua, you can be so dramatic at times. I—"

"Get out!"

Startled by his vehemence, she lurched toward the front door, opened it, and went out. Doubtless, she'd make an embarrassing spectacle of herself at the party. But Josh's mind was not on her.

He walked slowly to the hospital wing. Violet's door was slightly ajar. He pushed it open with a fingertip, almost as if he was afraid he might disturb her.

And there she was, in the dress he'd picked out for her. Her eyes were closed; she didn't look different than she had before, peacefully asleep.

Lightly, tenderly, Josh touched her cheek. He whispered, "Goodbye, Grandmother."

From behind him he heard Stephanie's voice. Somehow, she had gotten out of her room. "Goodbye, Grandmother." She was herself; and she was crying.

"Steph." He quickly put an arm around her. "You shouldn't see this."

"I can't help it. I have to."

"No, Steph, you don't."

"I loved her."

"So did I, Steph. And she loved us. But you ought to go back to your room now."

"O—okay. But she'll come back."

"Steph, that's nonsense. You know that can't happen."

"She will."

"Now, don't go thinking things like that."

He led her out into the hall, closing the door softly behind them. The lock on Stephanie's door had been pried open. One of her other personalities must have . . . "Will you promise me to stay inside?"

She nodded.

He left her in her room; he'd have to get Dr. Merchant. What could be delaying Nurse Black? As he walked out of the hospital wing, he heard Steph crying, more and more loudly, more and more hysterically.

When he was just outside the front door, he saw Nurse Black and the doctor coming up the lawn toward the house. He approached them and shook the doctor's hand.

"Josh, I'm so sorry, She was a wonderful woman."

"Thank you. I think she must simply have . . . gone to sleep. There's no pain in her face."

"I'll take care of the death certificate. Why don't you wait here?"

Suddenly the air was cut with a piercing shriek. It took a moment for it to register, but Josh realized it was Stephanie. He should have put her in another room, one with a lock.

He turned to go back into the house, when the front door flew open and Stephanie came running out, clearly in hysterics. She had Violet's corpse in her arms. Violet's arms were wrapped around her, and the two of them tore across the lawn, in a grotesquely frantic dance of death. The movement made Violet seem to be alive, seem to be moving.

It took Josh, Nurse Black, and the doctor a moment to react to what they'd seen. As soon as he recovered himself, Josh tore after Steph.

She ran straight to the party pavilion. Violet's body clung to her, jerking about like a hideous rag doll.

A few of the guests saw what was happening and reacted in alarm. They dropped their drinks and scattered to get out of the way of the madwoman clinging to the dead woman.

Stephanie screamed again. But it seemed there were two voices, and Josh could have sworn he saw Violet's mouth open wide.

The party guests ran every which way. One of them tripped over one of the ropes that supported the tent, and it collapsed at one corner.

Finally Josh managed to catch up to Steph. Just behind him came Tom Bowers and one of his security men.

Josh caught her and shook her by one of her shoulders. "Steph! For God's sake, Steph! What are you doing?"

She laughed wildly. "He has come for her! He will come for all of you! He will take me for his lover!"

Again she laughed, a wild, incoherent howl.

Not knowing what else to do, reacting like a man who had seen too many old movies, Josh slapped her, hoping it would bring her to her senses. She recoiled and dropped Violet's

body. And Josh could have sworn he saw Violet move, writhing on the ground like a creature in pain.

"You should not have done that!" The voice thundered from Stephanie's mouth, but it was deep and threatening. It was Roger's voice, not hers. Roger, the strong man who protected the others.

Tom and his man caught her by the arms. She picked up Tom and threw him across the ground like a toy. The other man started to grapple with her/him. But Josh shouted, "Stop!"

Stephanie/Roger froze. So did everyone else. From outside the tent came the sound of car engines starting, as the guests scrambled to leave. There was no way this could ever be explained to them, not in a satisfactory way. To have this awful spectacle disrupt a family event . . .

Josh made his voice as firm as he could. "Roger, you don't want to be doing this."

Roger glared at him. "You don't know."

"I know you don't want to hurt anyone."

Slowly the body language changed. Roger was gone. Stephanie was back. She began to cry again. "Roger's sorry, Josh." She looked at Violet's body, crumpled on the ground, and got down on a knee beside it. Tenderly, she stroked her grandmother's hair. "She's gone now."

"She has been gone, Steph."

"No, he sent her back. I don't know why."

"He? No one 'sent her back,' Steph."

She nodded, slowly and with assurance. "He—Imhotep."

Hearing the name, he froze. Then, weakly, he looked around. Where was Jim? Where was Ardath Bey?

Finally Dr. Merchant stepped forward. "Are you okay now, Stephanie?"

She nodded.

"Will you let me give you an injection, to calm you down and help you rest?"

"I'll have to ask Roger."

She closed her eyes and seemed to go into a trance. When she opened them again, she smiled and told him, "Roger says that will be okay. But *she* won't be affected by it."

"She?"

"The princess."

Josh mouthed the words, "Her new personality." The doctor took Stephanie by the arm and led her out of the tent. Just at the entrance, she looked back again at Violet's corpse. "She did not want to come back. He made her do it."

The tent was nearly empty now. The guests and most of the help had scattered. The majority of them had simply . . . left. But a few were standing off at what they thought was a safe distance, watching, trying to make sense of the terrible thing they'd witnessed. Among themselves, they all said that Violet only *seemed* to be moving, that it was Stephanie's motion that gave her grandmother the illusion of animation. That was the only possible explanation, right?

Josh asked one of the security men to carry Violet's body back up to the mansion and place it in her room, in her bed. The man seemed unhappy about it, understandably, Josh thought. "Be gentle with her. Please. And don't worry," he told him, "you'll all be getting extra pay for this."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." The man lifted Violet's body and headed for the house.

Jim joined Josh and watched the doctor and nurse lead Steph back to her room. "God, that was horrible."

"That doesn't begin to describe it, Jim. There's something terribly, terribly wrong. Our family—"

"Has she ever done anything like this before?"

He looked at Jim, stared at him. "Have you heard what's been happening? The freak deaths?"

"No, I—"

"Come on, then."

Stephanie, assisted by the doctor and nurse, was halfway to the house. Suddenly she collapsed. It seemed inevitable to Josh, after everything that had happened. The doctor and nurse carried her to the mansion, where a servant opened the door for them. Josh and Jim followed.

"Jim—Ardath Bey. Where is he?"

"I think I saw him leaving with the others. What? What is he—"

"There's something wrong, Jim."

He explained to Jim what had happened to their cousins Hank and Helena, the terrible deaths they had died. Then he told him about Louise and Ari's kids dying too. "All of the deaths seemed to have involved corpses—to have happened near dead bodies. And then this, here, today. I don't understand it, Jim, but something just awful is happening to us."

"Coincidence, Josh." Jim was still shaken by what had happened at the party. "Strange deaths do happen. Flukes happen. We've just had more than our share, that's all."

"I haven't told Ari and Louise the news about their kids yet. Do you want to come with me?"

Jim shook his head. "Why don't I go check on Steph?"

Josh nodded. "I'll meet you there."

From the next room came his mother's voice. "I hope you're happy, Joshua."

He looked in. She was standing dramatically beside the mantelpiece. For once, there was no drink in her hand.

"It might be nice if you didn't look quite so pleased, Mother."

"I told you not to do this—not to have this grotesque party. I hope you're happy."

"You said that already. And you never hope I'm happy."

Jim appeared behind him, and she glared. "Are *all* our disagreeable relatives going to show up?"

"He's trying to help, Mother. Which is more than you are doing. Is it possible you're too drunk to realize what happened?"

"I know perfectly well. You should have had more sense." She made a sour face. "A party for a woman on her deathbed."

"What should I do when you are on yours?"

"You needn't worry about that. I plan to outlive you."

"They way things are going with the Brandts, that's a distinct possibility." He turned to Jim. "Come on."

Ten feet away from the door, Josh said, loudly enough for her to hear, "You'd think she'd have drunk herself into her grave by now, wouldn't you?"

"I thought you'd had enough of death. Go on up to Lou and Ari, Josh. I'll check on Steph."

Josh climbed the steps slowly. Giving the awful news to his sister and brother-in-law would add one more layer of pain to an already dreadful day. He knocked lightly on their door and went in. They were sitting, side by side, on the edge of the bed. Ari was holding Louise's hand. She was trembling, as if she already suspected the worst.

Ari turned to face him. "I'm sorry we haven't been down. Lou has been—well, we were just coming."

Lou asked. "Is it . . . are they . . . ?"

Josh nodded. Words wouldn't come.

"We knew. Somehow, we knew. That's why we didn't come down to the party. I hope you're not angry."

"No." He couldn't look her in the eye. "The way the party went, it's just as well, I imagine . . ."

"What happened?" Lou got to his feet.

"Later. I'll tell you later."

"I've never—we've never had anyone die in a plane crash before. What happens? I mean, do they release the—the—do we get to claim our children, or do we have to wait for the FAA or someone to—?"

"I don't know, Lou. I'll make a few phone calls and find out."

Louise broke down and began crying hysterically and repeating, "No, no, no, no . . ."

"I'll leave you alone. I have to check on Stephanie."

She pulled herself out of her mad grief. "Steph. What's wrong?"

"Violet died, just before the party." He hoped they wouldn't notice the evasion. "I have to go check, okay? I'll make those calls and be back."

He left them holding each other; Lou was crying again, quite uncontrollably.

Back down in the hospital wing, he went first to Violet's room. She had been placed on her bed, hands folded on her chest. She looked, he thought, for all the world as if she was only asleep. The . . . unpleasantness . . . had barely even wrinkled her dress.

Then he went to Steph's room. The doctor and nurse were still there, and Jim was watching them. Steph seemed to be asleep.

Jim whispered to him, "They've given her a sedative."

Josh motioned to the doctor to join them. "Dr. Merchant, will a sedative work on her? I mean, on all of her . . . people?"

"There's no way of knowing. Multiple personality cases are . . ." Whatever he was going to say, he left unfinished. "There are documented cases of patients with more than one personality, and the most remarkable things happen. Eye color can change from one personality to the next."

"You're joking." Jim had never heard this before.

Josh had; he nodded for the doctor to go on.

"There's even one case where one of the personalities was a heroin addict. When he went into withdrawal, the patient simply switched to another personality—and was fine. It seems impossible, medically speaking, but these are documented cases. You can find them, and a lot more like them, in the literature.

We've only just begun to discover the powers that lie latent in the human mind."

"Somehow," Jim said, not trying to hide his skepticism, "I don't find any of this reassuring. Or even convincing."

"All we can do," Dr. Merchant added, "is hope the sedative works. I gave her an extra-large dose."

In her sleep, Stephanie muttered, "Imhotep. Imhotep. Ankh-es-en-Amun."

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Josh said, "Well, at least she's asleep. Or should I say, they're all asleep?"

"You really ought to consider having her institutionalized, Josh. You know my private clinic would be—"

"I'm not sure I can do that. I hate the sound of it. She's . . . she's family."

"Even so."

"Is there anything a . . . a hospital or your clinic can do for her that we can't do here?"

"That's not really the point. Do you want to live with her running mad every now and then? Do you want a repeat of what happened here today? No, Josh, no one should have to live with that kind of ongoing tension. Placing her . . . somewhere will be the best thing both for her and for the rest of you."

"I'm not sure she'd see it like that."

"Which one of her?"

"Point taken, but even so . . ."

Jim got between them. "There'll be plenty of time to consider all the possibilities, I imagine. There's no need to make a decision now. I think we're . . . I don't think any of us is quite himself right now."

"No." The doctor seemed to realize he was right. "Just so." He got his things together and headed for the door. "If there's anything else I can do for you, or if anything else happens, don't hesitate to call me." He handed Josh a card with his

private number, and Josh escorted him to the hall. The doctor glanced at the door of Violet's room. "Would you like me to call the undertaker for you?"

"No, I'll take care of that. Thanks, though."

With that, the doctor left. Josh looked at Jim, then the nurse. "What time do you get off duty?" he asked her.

Glancing at her watch, she told him, "Another hour and a half."

"I hope we can count on your discretion about today's . . . events."

"Yes, sir. Of course."

"You—everyone on duty today—will be receiving a bonus."

"Thank you." She seemed nervous. "Should I go and . . . should I go and stay in Miss Brandt's room?"

"I don't think that will be necessary. It looks like she'll be sleeping for a while."

"I'll check on her every fifteen minutes."

"Good. Thank you."

"Otherwise, I'll be in my office."

Josh led Jim back to the main part of the house. "Let me just call the mortician."

"You want me to take care of it?"

"No, Jim. It's my job."

Jim looked concerned. "A lot's happened today. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'll be fine."

Obviously doubtful, Jim said he was going to get to the hotel and bring his things back. "I think you're going to need me here."

"I think so too. Thanks, Jim."

After he left, Josh called the undertaker who'd served the Brandt family for decades and explained that Violet had passed away.

"Do you have a death certificate?" the woman on the other end asked.

"Yes, all signed and ready."

"We'll have someone there within the hour."

He thanked her and hung up. Then he sank into the nearest chair, let out a deep sigh, and closed his eyes. In only a moment he was asleep.

But there were dreams, strange, violent ones. When he woke, a few minutes later, he had an unshakable conviction there was something wrong.

Violet. The hospital wing. Something told him it was a mistake to have left her body unattended.

Telling himself he was being irrational—that he was letting the day's events make him crazy—he rushed back to the wing.

Everything was quiet. Unnaturally so. The stillness was eerie. Feeling the need to break it, he called out, "Nurse Black?"

There was no answer. She must be in the restroom, or . . .

Josh opened the door of Violet's room. She was lying exactly where he had left her, on her bed, arms folded, looking like a woman asleep. He left, closing the door softly, then realized there was no need to be so quiet. But some impulse made him lock the door behind him.

"Nurse Black?" He called to her softly.

And again there was no answer.

He walked to the nurse's office. Opened the door.

She was dead; her throat was torn open. Blood covered half the room.

"Oh, God."

He knew he should call the police right away. But his most urgent thought was for Stephanie.

Just as he stepped out of the office, there was someone coming out of her room. The figure vanished around a corner so quickly

he could not be sure he even saw it. But it was a tall, elegantly thin, robed man. It could only have been Ardath Bey.

Josh rushed to her room. She was sitting up in bed, smiling and laughing like a schoolgirl.

"Steph! Are you okay?"

She laughed at him. "He was here."

"Who?" He knew what she would say.

"My lover, my sweet lover."

"Stephanie, who was here?" He said it as forcefully as he could without, he hoped, upsetting her.

"He loves all of us, Josh. We are all in his embrace."

"Who, Steph? Who?"

Her body language changed. She sat erect, regally so. She blinked. The foreign personality was back, the princess. Slowly, in a low, musical voice, she said the name.

"Imhotep."

CHAPTER 9

Nurse Black's death was ruled an accident. She had stumbled and fallen on a scalpel she'd been carrying for some reason. It was found not far from her body. Josh didn't believe it. But what he suspected was so strange, the police could never have made sense of it. The Brandts and their money carried a lot of weight in Fox Chapel; the police were relieved to have such a convenient explanation for the woman's death.

Hank's funeral took place the morning after Violet died. His brother Harry, an accountant and one of the family's failures—a drab little man with no talent and no personality—made the arrangements; their father was dead, and their mother was too shattered by the news of her other son's slaughter to be of much use in planning.

Josh and Jim attended, of course. Josh's mother Claudia refused; she was, she said, "indisposed." No one had to ask what that meant.

Except for a few members of Hank's immediate family, the mourners were nearly all theater people. They hugged and "air kissed" each other and pretended they weren't rivals. Jim said he could almost see them sizing each other up, wondering who would get Hank's job with the theater company.

"They wouldn't do that, Jim." Josh was a bit shocked at his cynicism.

"Wouldn't they? Just look at them. They're practically salivating."

Jim studied the faces of the mourners. "You're right."

"What was it Louise Brooks said? 'Every actor has a natural hatred for every other actor, present or absent, living or dead.' I'm surprised none of them has kicked the coffin."

"Jim, stop it."

"Be grateful Lou's kids' funeral is on the West Coast and Helena's is in New York. There's no way we could get to them, not with everything we have to do here."

"What do you mean?"

"If you think actors are awful, try hanging out with a few lawyers or college kids."

"Jim, please." He decided to ignore the cynicism.

But Hank's funeral was barely a dry run for what was to come.

Violet's body was embalmed and "prepared for viewing" at White Bros. Funeral Home, the most prestigious in the city. All the best families used them. Their facility was furnished with antiques and plush furniture; the carpets were an inch thick. And their rates were sufficiently high that only a few funerals a year made them a very nice profit. That meant that the entire building was available for the Brandt viewing.

It was one of the largest such affairs the city had seen in decades. Not only the immediate family and the local place-seekers came to stare at her corpse, but there were politicians from across the state, and relatives so distant Josh had never even met them before. Six parlors at White Bros. were filled with people. There were thousands of flowers, so many the scent of them became faintly sickening.

The only immediate family absent were Louise and Ari. They had had to return to California, to bury their own

dead. Louise was doubly upset; when she was a girl, she and Violet had been close.

Josh wanted Violet to be buried in the same lavender and blue gown she was to have worn at her birthday party. But family traditionalists pressured him to have her dressed in black. He was not happy about it, but he gave in to their wishes. It would, they assured him, look better for the public.

He found himself lingering close to Jim, for moral support. He had helped with the arrangements and had been there for Josh every time he needed someone. The first night of the viewing, noticing that Josh was looking out of his depth, Jim detached himself from a group of state politicians and joined him. "How are you holding up?"

"Oh, you know. I still haven't adjusted to the fact she's gone, Jim. She was always there. She was the mother my mother never was."

"Everyone loved her." He looked across the room and saw Josh's mother; she had obviously had too much to drink, as usual. "Except dear Aunt Claudia, that is."

"I've put Mother on notice: stay sober till after the service is over, or I'll do everything I can to humiliate her in public."

"I doubt if even that would work."

"She cares about her image. I think it may be the only thing she does care about."

"What image? Everyone knows what she's like."

"Shh." Josh held a finger to his lips. "Don't tell her. It's the only leverage I have over her."

More people crowded into the mortuary, and more.

"Look at them." Josh could barely hide his contempt. "You can almost see dollar signs in their eyes, like characters in a cartoon."

"It'll be over soon enough."

"Three days of this. I don't know why I let them talk me into an extra day of it. I don't know how I'll stand it."

"You've always been stronger than you think, Josh. You'll be fine."

"I hope so." He nodded in the direction of a little private room, and Jim followed him and closed the door behind them. "Jim, are *you* okay?"

He was lost. "I liked Violet, but I was never as close to her as you were."

"No, I mean—I don't know how to ask you this—have you been okay?"

"You're being awfully cryptic, Josh."

"You know about all these freak accidents."

"Hank, Helena, and Lou's kids."

"Yes. Exactly. I haven't wanted to ask you before, but— Has anything like that happened to you? I mean, I know you're not dead—"

"You should ask my girlfriend."

Josh ignored the joke. "I know you're not dead, for God's sake, but has anything strange happened around you?"

"No. Josh, I'm fine."

"That's good." He sighed, loudly. "You've always been the one member of the family I trust. Well, you and Violet. Like I said, I'm really glad you're here."

"I'll stay as long as I can."

"Thanks."

"Is . . . is Stephanie coming here?"

"No. I've talked her out of it. But she wants to come to the funeral. I'm not sure I should let her."

"It can't do any harm, can it?"

"I don't know how sane she is anymore. How *stable*. You know that."

"Yes, I guess I do."

Out in the main room, it was becoming apparent to more and more people that Claudia was unpleasantly drunk. She

was wandering from one group to the next, saying foul things about Violet, hoping someone would, finally, agree with her. Instead, they looked away and moved to other rooms as soon as they could.

Finally, finding herself isolated and the room emptying, she strayed to Violet's coffin, stood directly beside it, and glared down at the corpse. "You always hated me."

Violet's eyelids fluttered. She hissed. Abruptly her right hand shot out and caught hold of Claudia's wrist.

Claudia shrieked and pulled away, and Violet's hand fell back into position across her chest.

Josh and Jim heard her scream and ran back out to the viewing room to see what was wrong.

Claudia was in hysterics. "She moved! She moved! Oh, my sweet Jesus, she moved!"

Most of the crowd—such of them as had not gone elsewhere—were gaping, not knowing how to react to her display. Josh cut through them and caught her by the shoulders. "Mother, I warned you—"

"I have *not* been drinking."

He could see in her eyes that she was lying, but there was no point pressing the issue. "What happened?"

"I went to stand beside the casket. One last time to see her."

"Why, for heaven's sake? You never bothered to visit her when she was alive."

She was crying uncontrollably. "One last look, to be sure. I was standing there, looking down at her face. The Whites have used too much makeup. Haven't you noticed? She looks like an old madam."

He still had his hands on her shoulders; he squeezed. "I asked you what happened? Are you having the DTs or something?"

She was crying more and more loudly. "Her hand reached out and caught my wrist."

"Don't be absurd."

"She did!" She screamed it.

Jim crossed the room to them. "Is everything all right?"

Josh wasn't able to keep a bitter edge out of his voice. "Fine, Jim. Mother's seeing things, that's all. Next, it'll be pink elephants hiding behind the tombstones at the cemetery." He turned to her. "Couldn't you have the decency to stay sober even for a funeral?"

"I am telling you, Joshua, she reached out and caught hold of my wrist."

"Of course." He looked to Jim. "Get her out of here, will you, please? Take her home and put her to bed."

"Sure, Josh."

Josh stalked away, not trying to conceal his anger. The other guests had sense enough to leave him alone. He went back to the private room and paced, trying to calm down. What she said had happened . . . it can't have. It wasn't possible. But . . . but . . . He forced himself to calm down; it would be a mistake to let his agitation show.

Jim took Claudia by the arm and led her out of the funeral home. "My car's over here. Come on, Aunt Claudia."

By the light of a streetlamp he noticed that her right wrist was bruised; it was slowly turning bright red.

"I'm not making it up, Jim, and I didn't imagine it. She caught hold of me."

"She's dead, Aunt Claudia. Dead and embalmed. There's no way she could be alive."

"She is."

"Come on. You'll feel better after a good night's sleep."

"I suppose there's no reason why anyone should believe a woman who's had a drink or two."

"Not one who hallucinates, no. Come on."

She got into the car beside him and decided not to waste any more time trying to persuade him. "Take me to the Hilton."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said I want to go to the Hilton. Violet's house is no place for me now."

"But—"

She snapped at him. "The Hilton! Now!"

"All right, for God's sake. Don't talk to me like I'm one of your servants."

"You're a poor relative. It's the same thing."

"Aunt Claudia, you're in mourning, or you're supposed to be."

"Are you trying to be funny, Jimmy?"

"You might at least respect Josh's grief, even if you don't feel any of your own."

"Let the dead take hold of Josh's hand, and see what his grief turns into."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, be quiet."

He got her to the hotel. She didn't have her credit cards with her, so he paid for her room. It seemed worth it to be rid of her.

Back at the mortuary, after Josh calmed himself down, he spent a few minutes asking among the visitors, to see if anyone had noticed anything odd. None of them had. Claudia's story was rubbish. It had to be.

The funeral was held on a gray Friday morning, at a private cemetery in the heart of Pittsburgh. Rain threatened but never happened; but there was fog, thick and unpleasant. It hung-over the graveyard; the Brandt family monuments, the largest and most impressive in the cemetery, were damp from it. It seemed to come up from the earth itself, in long gray-greenish streamers. Josh kept watching the sky, hoping for the first rays of sunshine.

The fog persisted, seemingly impossibly, despite the fact that a stiff wind gusted now and then. Women's dresses blew in it; their hats threatened to blow away. The flowers for the service scattered about the graveyard. Yet every time the wind seemed about to dissipate the fog, more thick mist would rise from the ground and hover over and around everyone and everything till the next gust began to scatter it.

The earth was damp. People picked their way carefully to the gravesite. Their footprints quickly filled with moisture. Josh overheard someone comment that it was like a funeral in New Orleans, where the earth was always wet and the graves are above ground.

The bishop of Pittsburgh presided over the service. He seemed—quite inappropriately, to Josh's mind—to be enjoying himself, to be taking outrageous pleasure in the way his black satin robes caught the breeze so dramatically.

The mayor and all of city council attended. The county manager and various state officials came; this was a political event. The Brandt family, through their various foundations and businesses, made campaign contributions enough to decide almost any race in the region. Not to show up for the funeral would have been politically inopportune, to say the least. One plump state senator had had to fly back from a Caribbean vacation to be there; he was in a foul mood, and he found himself smiling every time the wind blew more flowers away.

The media covered the event, unhappy that the pervasive fog kept them from getting good footage of the distinguished mourners. That didn't stop them from trying, of course.

The Brandts owned a large interest in the Pittsburgh *Sun-Telegraph*, so the coverage there would be respectful. The broadcast media were more problematic. To be safe, Josh had had to pay two dozen security people to keep them from getting too close to the actual services. The reporters grumbled and

muttered vague comments about freedom of the press, but there wasn't much they could do.

Josh's mother came. She refused to wear black. "It makes me look old."

"You *are* old, Mother."

"I am no such thing."

She originally said she was going to wear red. They had had argument after argument about it over the phone, for three days, and he finally persuaded her to wear dark gray, at least. And pointedly, she had not returned to the funeral home after that first night. Josh was more grateful than not. Explaining away her absence was easier than dealing with whatever scenes she might create.

She was sober for the services, for the first time in anyone's memory. When Josh commented on it, at the beginning of the morning, she laughed and told him, "Are you serious? I've been waiting for this moment thirty years now. I wouldn't miss a minute of it for the world."

When Josh told Jim about this, Jim smiled ruefully and said, "Traditional family values, Brandt style."

"Mothers are supposed to be kind, loving, and generous."

"You're too old to believe in fairy tales, Josh. Claudia's my mother's sister, but I've never liked her and never will. If she wasn't head of the richest branch of the family, none of us would put up with her."

"I am head of the family, not her."

"You know what I mean."

He did, and he let it drop. At least she'd had the decency to show up.

Jim had stayed at the mansion, to help Josh with all the preparations, coordinating security, and so on. Jim's duties in the Middle East had kept them apart for too long, and Josh was glad to have someone nearby he could count on.

Besides planning the funeral and fighting with his mother, Josh had had something else on his mind. Stephanie wanted to come to the funeral, too. She had insisted, and despite his repeated attempts to dissuade her, he finally gave in. He had tried to put his foot down—as head of the family—and simply forbade her to leave the hospital wing. But she had retreated into one of her other personalities, Robin, the abused little boy. The sound of his, or rather her, crying filled the house. Josh relented.

But . . . what might she do at the funeral? Would she be in control of herselves, or would one of the others come to the fore and . . . and do God knew what?

More and more, she had become that new person, the babbling foreign princess, and Josh did not want her, of all the personalities, appearing at the funeral; it would have made too much of an unpleasant show, and it would have given the press something convenient to ridicule. In exchange for letting Steph attend, he made her promise she'd do her best to remain herself.

So far, the day had gone well enough. The requiem mass at the cathedral went off smoothly. The bishop was more eloquent than usual, and he looked stunning in his new black silk vestments. The press had been kept relatively distant. One photographer had managed to sneak into the cathedral somehow, but security hustled him back outside again in no time.

There was no way to keep them from taking photographs as the coffin was carried out of the church—Jim and Josh were both pallbearers—and placed in the hearse. And the press cars dogged the cortege. But the cemetery was a private one, gated and fenced; the press had to wait unhappily outside and shoot their photos through the bars of the fence.

The bishop had stumbled on the way from his limo to the graveside. A particularly strong gust of wind caught his robes

and knocked him off balance. One of his altar boys caught his hand and steadied him.

After that, things went smoothly enough. There was one brief shower—not much more than a sprinkle, really—and then the rain stayed away. The bishop and the eulogists droned on, comfortingly dull as they were supposed to be. People got lost in their own thoughts. When, finally, Josh spoke, he did it with such animated conviction, everyone found themselves paying attention despite themselves.

It wasn't that he said anything unexpected. His eulogy consisted of the usual reminiscences—how much Violet had meant to him, how generous she always was, and on and on. But the fact that he loved her, really loved her and was not simply paying lip service, came through clearly. It was so unusual for a family like theirs that people paid attention, hoping he'd slip and tell what they imagined must be the truth.

As he spoke, the breeze gusted, scattering the fog. More streamers of mist rose from the ground almost at once. It was nearly eleven A.M.; surely the sun should be burning this off by now? He went on with his eulogy.

Then, for one startling instant, the fog was gone altogether. Josh scanned the crowd and was pleased that everyone seemed to be listening to what he said about Violet. But then, for that one brief moment as the fog disappeared, he saw a figure among the headstones in the distance, watching, apparently waiting. And it was Ardath Bey. The security people had been especially vigilant; Josh was paying them enough to be sure of that. How could the Egyptian have gotten past them?

Then an instant later, mist rose from the ground again, covering him. It billowed, and he vanished behind it.

The strangest thing: Ardath Bey's eyes seemed almost to be glowing.

Stephanie saw him too. She didn't say anything, but she had been standing beside Josh, listening to his words. Then he felt her begin to move off, in the direction where Ardath Bey had been. Josh took hold of her hand as firmly as he could without making it apparent that he was holding her back. She struggled to get away for a moment, then gave up and stopped and listened.

Josh hurried through the rest of his eulogy. Had he seen right? Had the Egyptian been there, in the gated cemetery despite security? Had he been watching them all, like a predatory animal?

Josh was the last speaker. When he finished, the bronze coffin was lowered into the grave. Family and friends sprinkled earth or dropped flowers onto Violet's polished casket and whispered prayers for her soul.

His mother approached him. "Well, that's that. I'm going to a hotel now."

"A hotel? Mother, you're coming home with the rest of us. You have to put in an appearance at the wake."

"Tell them I have a headache."

There was no point arguing. The last thing he wanted to do was to have a scene in front of the assembled mourners. Claudia walked briskly to her limo. The driver held the door for her, then got in and started the engine. In only a moment she was gone.

"You see what I mean about our family?" Jim had watched her go, too.

"No, I guess I don't." Josh kept watching the place where he'd seen Ardath Bey. Or had he? In the fog, and in his own emotional state, almost anything could look like anything. Or so he tried to tell himself.

"We're not like other families, Josh. We're . . . we're Brandts, I guess."

"Does that mean we can't expect our mothers to be human?"

"And we're old money." Jim shook a bit of mud off his shoe. "Well, old-ish. Imagine what the nouveau riche must be like."

"Just look around. There are enough of them here."

"Come on, Josh, let's get going."

Josh watched as the assembled mourners began to walk back to their cars. "No, I think I want to wait here for a few minutes. One last bit of private time with Violet." He turned to Stephanie. "You too?"

She nodded.

"Sure, Josh." Jim looked doubtful. "I'll head back to the house and greet people for you till you arrive." Jim gave them each an impulsive hug.

"Thanks, Jim."

"Should I tell the security men to stay here with you?"

"Yes." He said it so emphatically, Jim was a bit startled. Then he reconsidered. "Take half of them. Have the rest stay."

"Okay, I'll give them the word."

"See you at the house."

Cars headed off toward the cemetery gate, and out onto the main road. Jim's was the last to go. The remaining security men idled where they had been. The reporters had all followed the main funeral party when it left; why would they be needed here? Tom Bowers caught his underlings' eyes and gave an exaggerated shrug.

Josh and Stephanie stood alone at the side of Violet's tomb. Neither of them said anything. Violet was gone. There were no words, really, for their loss. The fog was growing dense again, swirling in the wind but not dissipating.

Tom Bowers approached them. "Is everything all right, Mr. Brandt?"

"Fine, fine, Tom." He spoke softly. Seeing Violet's coffin in the ground was the final confirmation that she was gone, irrevocably gone. "Just keep your men around for a few more minutes, will you, please?"

"Sure, Mr. Brandt."

The man retreated. The security detail surrounded Josh and Steph, at a distance of twenty yards or so. By any sane standard, the two of them should have been safe. The moment—and their grief—should have been secure.

But something happened. The mist turned a bright, sickly green. Then there was a sound, a faint rasp. It took Josh a moment to realize where it was coming from: someone, or something was scratching inside Violet's coffin.

He looked around. What could be happening? Part of him wanted to jump down into the grave and open the casket; another part of him knew how completely foolish that would look.

Suddenly Stephanie let out a loud, sad cry. "Imhotep! Imhotep, my husband!" It was the new voice, the voice of the princess, speaking heavily accented English.

Josh caught hold of her hand and held it tightly.

"Why are you keeping me from him!" She pulled free of Josh quite violently and ran off into the green mist. It was thick enough that she was hidden after only ten yards or so.

Josh bolted after her and shouted to the men, "Get her! Stop her!"

For an instant the fog parted, and there she was, in the arms of Ardath Bey. He looked at Josh and a smile came to his lips. His eyes, once again, seemed to glow. Then the fog covered the two of them again.

The security men, all shouting, converged on the spot where they had been.

But Stephanie and Ardath Bey were gone.

"Find them! For God's sake, find them!"

Josh joined the search. They fanned out and covered the graveyard. But there was no sign of either Stephanie or her . . . abductor? Paramour? Neither seemed quite the word. She had gone to him willingly, yet he was obviously doing something unnatural to control her.

"Should I call the police, Mr. Brandt?"

"No. Not yet." He was more shaken that he could remember being. "No. Search the cemetery again. Search everyplace they could have gone. There are mausoleums—open them and see if anyone's hiding there. Then report back to me at the mansion."

"I can call more men."

"Do it."

"But the police—"

"No police. Not now, not yet. Nothing happened here that could be called a crime, not exactly. But I want you to find my sister."

"Yes, sir."

He wanted to add that there was no rational way to explain what had happened. The police would think them fools. And besides . . . and besides, he didn't understand it himself.

He got into his car and told the driver to get him home as quickly as possible. Just as they were leaving the cemetery, the sun broke though and the last of the fog dissipated. The burial ground was suddenly green and golden, and the headstones glistened like new in the sunlight.

Josh was in no mood to be at the wake.

Jim was playing host at the mansion, handling all the social and political pleasantries. The brightly colored tent for Violet's birthday celebration had been replaced by a black one. Everyone in attendance was eating and drinking—Josh had instructed the household staff to use the best wine—and seemed to be in a good mood. Jim saw him arrive, but no one else did; there would be no questions about why Stephanie wasn't with him—he could say she was unwell and had gone to her room. No one would question that.

"I have to get upstairs and change, Jim. Can you handle things for a few more minutes?"

"Sure. People keep asking for you, though. I think some of them might actually be concerned whether you're okay. Is Steph all right?"

He started to tell Jim what had happened to her, but something made him hold back. How could it be explained? He made a noncommittal comment and headed upstairs. Jim sensed he was lying, but just at that moment the CEO of a local specialty metals company buttonholed him.

In his room, Josh got a fresh suit, dark blue, not black, but picked out a sober black necktie to go with it. For a fleeting instant he thought, yes, his mother had been right, this wake was a bad idea. But there were family, business, and political obligations.

There came a knock at his door. It was Jim.

"Josh, what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Don't bullshit me, Joshua. I've known you long enough to know when you re lying."

Josh exhaled deeply. Of all people, Jim *would* know. But how to explain? "Can you tell me what you know about this man Ardath Bey, Jim?"

"Never mind him. Tell me what's going on."

"*He* is what's going on. I want to know everything you can tell me about him."

"But—"

"Jim, listen to me. There's something strange about him. Something . . . I don't know how to express it. Did he tell you he met me when I was in Egypt?"

"No!" The news startled Jim and seemed to alarm him slightly.

Josh gave a brief account of his encounter with Ardath Bey in Luxor, leaving out the more embarrassing parts. "And I

swear, I saw him here the morning of Violet's party. Before any of the other guests showed up—before you brought him—he was down at the end of the drive, staring up at the house. When I went to confront him, he was gone."

"That can't be, Josh. We were staying in the same hotel. He came here with me, remember?"

"He was here, Jim. I saw him. And now—now this weird interest in Steph. He took her, Jim. I don't know what to make of it all, but I don't mind admitting I'm frightened."

Jim was trying to process it all; the confusion showed in his face. "I don't blame you. If what you're saying is true—"

"It is."

"—then—I can't imagine what's going on. Maybe . . . maybe I should go and check on Steph."

"Steph's gone, Jim." He described what happened at the graveyard after everyone else had left. "She called him 'Imhotep' and ran to him. I saw them embrace, there among the headstones and mausoleums."

"But—Imhotep?"

"So—tell me everything you know about him." Josh sat down on the edge of his bed. "Please."

Just at that moment there was another knock at his door. He opened it; Nurse Davison was there.

"Yes, nurse?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Brandt. I looked for you downstairs, at the party, but no one seemed to know where you were."

"That's all right. What do you need?"

"Well . . . it's Miss Stephanie. She's been crying out in her sleep. Worse than I've ever heard."

"She's here?!"

Puzzled, Mrs. Davison nodded. "She—"

But before she could say anything else, Josh was out the door, with Jim right behind him.

Steph's cries were unmistakable. They could hear her as soon as they approached the hospital wing. Josh threw open the door to her room, and there she was, her face stained with tears, muttering something incomprehensible in her sleep. Now and then she raised her voice and shouted something, in that mad language of hers.

Josh stopped in his tracks. She had been gone; she had vanished in the arms of Ardath Bey. It couldn't have been Josh's imagination; the security men had seen it too. He and Jim looked at each other.

Mrs. Davison came up behind them, and Josh turned to her. "How did she get here? Who brought her?"

"I don't know. I assumed you must have. When I heard her cry out—You mean, you didn't bring her back here?"

He ignored the question. "Find Dr. Merchant. He's out at the wake. Have him give her a sedative."

It puzzled her. "She's already asleep."

"Then have him give her something to make her sleep more soundly."

"Yes, sir." She left.

Jim and Josh looked at one another, then at Stephanie. In her sleep she was calling out, "Imhotep! Imhotep!"

CHAPTER 10

"How much family history do you know, Jim?"

It was late afternoon. Jim and Josh sat in the den, each with a snifter of brandy, in comfy chairs in front of a roaring fire. They hadn't been able to talk very much earlier; the wake, and Josh's duties as host, kept interfering. Happily, it began to rain about three o'clock, and the guests all left. Now the ground crew were busy taking down the tent and cleaning up. The one thing Josh had time to do was to assign several security men to the hospital wing. Ardath Bey—or whoever he was—would not be able to get near Stephanie again.

The den had a row of large mullioned windows, and Josh watched the crew work. "Now, Jim, I want you to tell me about him. Everything. Any detail you can think of."

Jim sipped his brandy. "I'm not sure what there is to tell. He's an Egyptian, or so he says. Filthy rich and very well connected. He gave me the impression he has friends in the government."

"You never bothered to check his background?"

"There never seemed to be any need. Everything about him seemed kosher, if that's the right word. He gave us sound advice on where to drill and, even better, he helped smooth the way through various levels of government bureaucracy. If you've ever dealt with a government in an Arab country, you'd know. He was quite a valuable associate. He even bought stock in Brandt Industries. Except . . ."

"Yes?"

"Except, now that I think about it, he always seemed very interested in the Brandts. He asked a lot of questions, you know, personal things about the family. Any time your name popped up in the news, he was there with a thousand questions. I remember thinking it was odd, once or twice. I mean, Muslims are usually so polite and formal and deferential and all that. But I never really made anything of it."

"Is he a Muslim, then?"

"I always assumed. Now that you ask, I guess the subject never really came up."

"Do you . . . do you know anyone who knows him, Jim?" It had been a long day; Jim found himself yawning. "I mean, who might know something about his background and where he came from?"

Jim shook his head.

"Does he have his own company we can investigate?"

"Nope. He always called himself an 'independent speculator.' Like I said, everything about him seemed on the up and up, so I never really thought . . . I mean, he knew the right people, and he made us money."

Their snifters were empty. Josh refilled them. "We have a very bad situation here, Jim. This man is . . . I don't know what to call it . . . *stalking* us, I guess."

"You—*we* wouldn't be the first wealthy family to have that happen."

"No. No, we wouldn't." Josh got up and walked to the window. Something had disturbed the workmen. It turned out they had unearthed a snake. It tried to slither away, but one of them picked up a rock and crushed it. "But usually, the people who stalk the wealthy aren't wealthy themselves. You say he has oil money?"

Jim nodded. "Or something like it. Natural gas—whatever. I guess I'm not sure. But the money's real."

"He was at my dig in Egypt. Hanging around. And there was a killing, a really horrible one."

"You think he's a psycho?"

"Nothing as simple as that. No, that would be too easy." He finally decided to tell Jim about his encounter with Ardath Bey in Luxor.

Jim listened, fascinated. "But . . . but why would he do such a thing?"

"God knows. But he said he knew dad. And it seemed plausible. He may actually have."

"Is there any way to find out?"

"I'd have to go back to Egypt."

"You mean *we* would. I'm part of this, now. And I know the territory better than you."

"If I only had some idea what to expect—why he's doing all this."

The door to the den flew open and Josh's mother strode in; she was carrying a small package. "Where are all the servants?"

Josh smiled at her. "Hiding?"

"This was just delivered. I had to deal with the FedEx driver myself."

"If I were you, I'd take a good, long shower right away."

"That is not funny, Joshua." She handed him the package and left the room even more quickly than she'd entered.

Jim and Josh looked at each other and broke out laughing.

"Dear, dear Aunt Claudia. She's actually more unpleasant sober than drunk. Who'd have thought?"

"You mean you never knew that?"

"I don't remember ever seeing her sober before."

The return address on the package was in Luxor. Wondering what it could be, Josh opened it. It contained a small jewel box and a note from Walter Siemens:

Joshua,

You have the deepest sympathy of everyone on the dig for the death of your grandmother. Family are our mainstay in this world, and the loss of a beloved family member is always a tragedy.

I felt the need to thank you for your patronage. I would have sent this sooner, but I've been dealing with the aftermath of Colin McKay's death, which as you must know left us all quite shaken.

This amulet is from the Eighteenth Dynasty, from the reign of the pharaoh Amenhotep III. It represents the ba, *the Egyptian conception of the human soul. The ancients wore these in much the same way modern people wear crosses. They believed it could protect a person from evil.*

Please accept it as a small token of my deep gratitude for your support. You will find the export certificate, duly issued by the Antiquities Service, attached.

Once again, please accept our deepest sympathy.

Might we hope to see you again sometime soon?

Yours,

Dr. Walter Siemens

Josh passed the note to Jim, gave the certificate a cursory reading, then unwrapped opened the jewel box. It was a beautiful red-gold cloisonné amulet, about two inches long, on a yellow-gold chain. It was in the form of a bird with a human head. The colors were vibrant—red carnelian, green faience, blue lapis lazuli—and the gold positively glistened in the light from the fireplace.

Jim whistled. "It's got to be valuable."

"Do you think my archaeologist would send me junk jewelry?"

"But . . . I've never seen anything like this. I mean, all the Egyptian gods were the reverse—human beings with the heads of animals."

"You want more brandy?"

"No thanks." Jim took the amulet carefully by its edges and examined it. "This is absolutely beautiful. The kind of thing I wouldn't have thought the Egyptians would let out of the country." He looked up at Josh and smiled. "Are you going to wear it?"

"I stopped wearing a crucifix when I was ten. You think I'd wear a thing like this?"

"Just asking. I wonder what it's worth."

"I can find out from Siemens, if you really want to know."

Jim got up and stretched. "Well, even if your mother's not going for that hot shower, I think I will."

"Me too. I think I need a nap."

They walked upstairs together, then each went to his room. Josh carried the amulet with him.

Outside, on the lawn, the minor flurry of excitement among the workers had passed. The dead snake, hacked into pieces with the edge of a shovel, had been tossed into the trash. None of the crew had recognized it for what it was, because it had not spread its hood. It was an Egyptian cobra.

Josh showered, changed into casual clothes, and decided to check on Stephanie one last time before he caught a nap.

Mrs. Davison was still on duty, working an extra shift till they could hire someone to replace Nurse Black. She gave him condolences again for Violet's death and asked him how the rest of the services had gone.

"Strange, Mrs. Davison, they were strange."

She picked up on his mood and didn't ask any more.

"Is Stephanie still asleep?"

She nodded.

"I'll just put my head in and take a look."

She was sleeping deeply and soundly, to all appearances. No restless tossing, no muttering. To see her at that moment, he'd have thought she lived the most peaceful existence imaginable, instead of the dark reality.

Slowly, carefully, he uncoiled the chain of the *ba* amulet, lifted her head, and placed it around her neck. Then he bent down and kissed her on the forehead. "Sleep well, Steph," he whispered.

His own sleep, when he finally got into bed, was anything but peaceful. He kept having dreams about Ardath Bey, stalking his family, and about Violet, alive in her coffin, clawing frantically to get out. For the first time, he found himself thinking there might be something to what his mother said happened at the funeral home, that night.

Violet was dead; he had seen it for himself. She had been taken by the morticians and embalmed. And yet . . . He had heard scratching; there was no mistaking it. Grandmother Violet, at least in his awful dream, had been buried alive.

Josh spent the next day putting his affairs in order. It was time to go back to Egypt, to try and get to the bottom of everything that had happened. And to learn what he could about Ardath Bey. His biggest job—or rather, his biggest concern—was arranging proper security for Stephanie.

Claudia moved back into the mansion late that afternoon. And she made straight for the liquor cabinet, as always. "Violet's gone now. This house is mine."

"Ours, Mother."

"Mine. I'm the eldest surviving member of the family."

"You haven't seen her will. I have."

"I can fight it."

"Do you want her coming back and terrorizing you again?"

Claudia went white for a moment, then recovered herself. "Don't be absurd."

"She warned you at the funeral home. Don't provoke her."

Josh didn't believe this, at least, not quite. But he knew that Claudia did. And he wasn't above using it as a weapon in their ongoing struggle.

By dinnertime, he and Tom Bowers had interviewed an extra contingent of twenty security people, and hired a dozen of them. The house would be guarded day and night; the hospital wing would be watched as closely as possible. Josh was still nervous about what might happen; Ardath Bey had gotten past security and inside the house before, after all. But everything humanly possible had been arranged to prevent another occurrence.

Just past sunset, he went to see Steph in her room. Nurse Davison smiled reassuringly and told him his sister had been quiet since waking up for dinner. She'd been reading and watching TV; to appearances she had remained herself.

To his relief he noticed Tom Bowers, attentively on duty just outside the wing.

"Steph. Hi."

She was reading a mystery novel. She put it aside, jumped up, and threw her arms around him. "Josh!"

"You act like we haven't seen each other in years." He hugged her back, as tightly as he could.

"I lose track of time. I never know how long I'm gone when one of the others takes over."

"Nothing like that has happened all day, from what Nurse Davison tells me."

She fell silent for a moment, sat down, then looked at him and said, "I miss Violet."

"So do I. She loved us, both."

"I don't mean it like that. I'm the only one here, now. It's lonely."

Oh. It hadn't occurred to him.

"Violet and I used to visit each other, Josh. When the nurse let us, I mean."

"I'll come see you whenever I can."

"I want you to move me to someplace where I'll have company."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Steph." Now with the family being stalked, it wasn't. There was no way a private facility could provide proper security. But he didn't want to say so to her.

"Please, Josh. I'm lonely already. It will only get worse."

"I'll talk to Dr. Merchant about it and see what he thinks, okay?"

"Promise?"

"Promise. I'm going to be gone for a few days, but I'll talk to him as soon as I get back."

"You're going away?" A look of alarm crossed her face. "Josh, please. I'm lonely here."

"I'm sure the nurses will keep you company. There's no one else to take them away from you."

"Please, Josh."

"I have to go, Steph. Honest."

Her eyes narrowed. Her voice changed. She was Robin, the little boy. "You're going to Egypt and leaving me here alone."

Josh stood to go. But he suddenly realized there was no way Steph—or any of her other personalities—could have known this. "Why do you think that, Robin?"

"Ours, Mother."

"Mine. I'm the eldest surviving member of the family."

"You haven't seen her will. I have."

"I can fight it."

"Do you want her coming back and terrorizing you again?"

Claudia went white for a moment, then recovered herself. "Don't be absurd."

"She warned you at the funeral home. Don't provoke her."

Josh didn't believe this, at least, not quite. But he knew that Claudia did. And he wasn't above using it as a weapon in their ongoing struggle.

By dinnertime, he and Tom Bowers had interviewed an extra contingent of twenty security people, and hired a dozen of them. The house would be guarded day and night; the hospital wing would be watched as closely as possible. Josh was still nervous about what might happen; Ardath Bey had gotten past security and inside the house before, after all. But everything humanly possible had been arranged to prevent another occurrence.

Just past sunset, he went to see Steph in her room. Nurse Davison smiled reassuringly and told him his sister had been quiet since waking up for dinner. She'd been reading and watching TV; to appearances she had remained herself.

To his relief he noticed Tom Bowers, attentively on duty just outside the wing.

"Steph. Hi."

She was reading a mystery novel. She put it aside, jumped up, and threw her arms around him. "Josh!"

"You act like we haven't seen each other in years." He hugged her back, as tightly as he could.

"I lose track of time. I never know how long I'm gone when one of the others takes over."

"Nothing like that has happened all day, from what Nurse Davison tells me."

She fell silent for a moment, sat down, then looked at him and said, "I miss Violet."

"So do I. She loved us, both."

"I don't mean it like that. I'm the only one here, now. It's lonely."

Oh. It hadn't occurred to him.

"Violet and I used to visit each other, Josh. When the nurse let us, I mean."

"I'll come see you whenever I can."

"I want you to move me to someplace where I'll have company."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Steph." Now with the family being stalked, it wasn't. There was no way a private facility could provide proper security. But he didn't want to say so to her.

"Please, Josh. I'm lonely already. It will only get worse."

"I'll talk to Dr. Merchant about it and see what he thinks, okay?"

"Promise?"

"Promise. I'm going to be gone for a few days, but I'll talk to him as soon as I get back."

"You're going away?" A look of alarm crossed her face. "Josh, please. I'm lonely here."

"I'm sure the nurses will keep you company. There's no one else to take them away from you."

"Please, Josh."

"I have to go, Steph. Honest."

Her eyes narrowed. Her voice changed. She was Robin, the little boy. "You're going to Egypt and leaving me here alone."

Josh stood to go. But he suddenly realized there was no way Steph—or any of her other personalities—could have known this. "Why do you think that, Robin?"

"Ankh-es-en-Amun," he cried.

"What do you know about her?"

"What she tells us."

"She's dead, Robin. She's been dead for a long time."

"She's here." His crying trailed off to a whimper. "She's here."

It dawned on Josh that she must be Stephanie's new personality, the princess who talked in an unknown tongue. She knew about Ankh-es-en-Amun, as much as anyone did; she always had. But to manifest her personality . . .

Still again, he had the realization that somehow, impossibly, Ardath Bey was involved in this . . .

That night, Josh and Jim were on a Brandt Industries jet, headed for the Middle East. Jim had company business to see to in Damascus, and more in Jerusalem. Josh was to wait for him in Cairo for three days; if he wasn't able to join him there, Josh was to travel on to Luxor alone, with the understanding Jim would follow as soon as he could.

They both slept for a good bit of the flight; the previous days had been more exhausting than either of them wanted to admit.

In between naps, though, they talked. Josh was worried about Stephanie, even with the extra security they'd arranged for. But Josh wouldn't be reassured. "Mother was squawking about it." He did a fair imitation of her. "'All these strange men, lurking around my house. They'll ruin my gardens.' I told her to let them. But I'm really afraid she'll find some pretext for getting rid of them."

"Steph'll be fine, Josh."

"I wish I could be sure." He rang for a flight attendant and asked him to bring them a couple of drinks, bourbon for Jim, a vodka and tonic for himself. Then he went on. "I've never

told you what happened in Egypt when Steph and I were kids, Jim, have I?"

"Nope. I've never wanted to ask."

"I wish you had. Mother raised us to keep family business inside the immediate family. But you're practically my brother, aren't you?"

"Am I? I mean, I guess so, if you say so. Thanks."

"I've never really talked about it with anyone. And to be honest, I'm not sure how much I really remember, how accurate it all is. But . . ."

"Yes?"

The attendant brought them cocktails, and Josh settled back in his seat.

"It goes back to the time my father disappeared."

"And your grandfather before him, right?"

"Grandfather ran off with a belly dancer. At least, that's what Violet always said."

"And he left his entire fortune behind? It must have been love." Jim took a long sip of his drink. "No self-respecting gold digger would have let him do that."

"Who knows? There are dumb belly dancers, I guess. One version of the story says he ran off with a boy. Violet always said that was especially funny, if it was true. But Grandfather was in Egypt looking for the tomb of Imhotep, this legendary, or half-legendary figure from Egyptian folklore. And there was some old book, the *Book of Anubis*, that was supposed to be buried with him."

"Wasn't Imhotep an architect or something?"

Josh nodded. "He supposedly built the first pyramid. It's called the Step Pyramid, I think."

"I've seen it. Impressive sort of an architect."

"Anyway, Grandfather somehow hooked up with an archaeologist who thought he knew where Imhotep was buried. So

he went to Egypt. And never came back." He laughed. "Violet always said it was the best thing he ever did for her. A young, smart, pretty woman, abandoned by her husband, with all that money to play with . . . I gather she cut quite a figure in 1930s society."

"She still cut quite a figure when she was in her eighties, Josh."

"Don't I know it. But Dad was always bothered by the way his father had vanished. Finding Imhotep's tomb became a kind of obsession with him. And he had the money to act it out."

"Like you."

Josh ignored this; the implication was too uncomfortable. "He hired an archaeologist to head the dig, financed him with everything he needed—all the equipment, all the manpower, a whole crew of Americans and Canadians."

"Scientists are always looking for money, aren't they?"

"Like everybody else, I guess. Anyhow, the Egyptian government didn't want anyone chasing after Imhotep's tomb, for some reason. I think they said it was just a legend, and they wanted 'real' archaeology. But dad was determined. He pumped so much money into their economy, they finally had to say yes to him."

Jim was listening and watching the Atlantic pass below them. There was a bright moon, and the ocean surface reflected it in a way he found almost hypnotic. "It's still like that in the Middle East. And in Pittsburgh, for that matter." He chuckled. "Or Washington."

"You're a cynic, Jim."

"If you have both brains and money, how can you help being a cynic?"

Josh decided to let this pass and get on with his story. "They worked on the dig for a long time. A couple of years, I think. Dad was always sending them messages, asking when they'd find something. I still remember how impatient he was. And he took it out on Mother."

"Who could deserve it more?"

"She was drunk all the time, even then. But finally they found what they were looking for. They wired—remember when people had to send telegrams to get news out?—and Dad picked up the whole family and took us to Luxor. Steph was eight then, a really pretty little girl. I was ten."

Jim narrowed his eyes. "I'll bet Claudia was really happy about having to go there."

"You know it—she bitched nonstop, made dad's life a living hell. And ours too, for that matter. And everybody else's. I remember her going around saying things like, 'These Arabs don't bathe properly, do they?'" He did his imitation again.

"You're good, you know that? You ought to be an actor." He rang for another drink. "But they found the tomb, right?"

Josh nodded. "Someplace way off the beaten track, as I remember it. But there was a sarcophagus, and it looked like it had never been opened. So they thought there'd be a mummy in it, intact. And for some reason, Dad expected to find that *Book of Anubis* there, too.

"But his team had waited to open the sarcophagus till we got there. Dad insisted on being in the news photos of the opening. Not that the news seemed to care much. But on the morning when they were to open it, he was so excited he could barely contain himself. He was convinced they'd find the old book, and that it would contain some deep, dark secret about life and death, or something. I found it all kind of confusing.

"Anyway, the day came, and I was sick—some childhood thing, an earache or something, I think. Mother stayed with me in the hotel. She was grateful for any chance to avoid the tomb and, as she put it, see Dad make a public fool of himself. Steph went with him to the dig site.

"Late afternoon, he sent a message that there had been a delay in opening the thing, for some reason only the archaeologist

understood. They wouldn't be opening it till late, or maybe till the next day. If I was feeling better, he wanted us to come and join him.

"And I *was* feeling better, but Mother sent back a reply that I had actually gotten worse and Dad would have to inspect his mummy without me or her.

"He sent the dig crew home for the night. He stayed at the site for a while after they left. And that was the last time anyone saw him. He just . . . vanished. When his crew got there the next morning, the mummy case was open, but there was no sign of the mummy that must have been in it. Nothing else in the tomb was touched.

"And Steph . . . They found her wandering in the hills later that day.

"It must have been awful for her. I mean, seeing your father die—or whatever—and being left alone in a tomb like that. But she didn't remember anything at all, and still doesn't. But when the local authorities brought her back to the hotel, she was changed. Subtly, but I could tell there was something different."

Jim had been listening, fascinated. "That's when her new personalities began to appear?"

"No, that didn't happen for a few months. But she was traumatized by whatever she had seen. That was clear."

"Well, she must have gotten counseling of some kind."

"No. You know Mother. Family problems and family secrets must stay inside the family. She got her own doctor to prescribe valium for Steph—she was eight, for Christ's sake, Jim—with instructions to give her one whenever she felt anxious, and that was that."

"I can't tell you how much time I've spent hoping I don't have too much genetic material in common with Aunt Claudia."

"A couple of years later, when Steph began to get really bad—even then it all had to be kept private. So we have a hospital

wing." He emptied his glass. "Violet actually wanted to go and live there, for some reason. I think she wanted to stay in the house so she could fight with Mother."

"Why did they hate each other so much?"

"God knows. Neither of them would ever talk about it. But I think there must have been bad blood from the first time they set eyes on each other."

Jim got up and stretched. "The things our families do to us. But—" He seemed reluctant to ask. "But, Josh, what do you really think happened to your dad?"

"I wish I knew." He kept his expression carefully neutral. "The local authorities never investigated much. Too much attention to what happened could hurt the tourist trade. The official story was that Muslim extremists had killed them all, then left the area, but I don't think anyone ever believed it. It was an expedient lie. Expedient for the State Department, too. They wanted good relations with Egypt, so they never raised much of a fuss." His voice took on a slightly bitter edge.

Not much later, there was turbulence—a storm over the Atlantic. The two of them strapped themselves in and braced themselves for a rough flight. Once the storm was behind them, the sound of the jet engines, combined with the alcohol they'd had, lulled Jim to sleep.

Josh had a phone call to make, one he was dreading.

"Lou?"

She recognized his voice. "You're coming for the funeral tomorrow, I hope."

"No, I'm afraid I can't. There's a bit of an emergency."

"Send one of your managers to deal with it. Josh, I really need you here. Ari's been . . . well, not at his best."

"It's not that kind of emergency, Lou. This is family. Steph's
"Oh." Disappointment registered in her voice. "What's wrong?"
"It's too complicated to explain now. I'll tell you all about it
as soon as I can."

Louise was holding back tears, he could tell. "Josh, isn't
there some way you can—"

"No, Lou, I really can't. I'll make it up to you somehow."

"How?! How on earth do you think you can—"

"Please, Lou, I'm sorry. You know I'd be there if I could."

There was a long pause. "Is Mother coming?"

"No, I don't think so. She says flying makes her sick."

"I should be grateful I guess."

"Count all the little blessings, huh?"

"But Josh, that means no one from the family will be here."

"I'm sorry, Lou."

"Can't you change your plans? Please?"

"This is important. I think it affects all of us."

Finally, she cried. "You're not making any sense."

"I know. I wish I could."

They talked for a few more minutes. Josh finally hung up and tried to get some sleep. But he was worried. And missing the funeral for Louise's children made him feel horrible. He tossed and turned in his seat all the way to Egypt and never really fell into a sound sleep.

Harry Brandt had had enough of death. First his brother Hank had died in that awful way. Then cousin Helena, almost at the same time. And then great-aunt Violet—not that her going was at all unexpected—and cousin Lou's kids.

Conscientious, dull little man that he was, Harry had handled all the arrangements for Hank's funeral. Then he

jumped on a plane to New York and attended Helena's. He was the only member of the Pittsburgh branch of the family to go; everyone else was caught up in the big funeral for Violet. Harry had never thought much of Violet; she had barely ever noticed him.

But, good man that he was, he went to her funeral and to the wake afterward at the Brandt mansion. He ate, drank, and hardly socialized at all. He was an accountant, and he wasn't the kind of accountant who stood a chance of holding his own in conversation with anyone past puberty.

It didn't occur to him to resent the way the family treated him. Everyone treated him that way, friends—to the extent he had any—coworkers, bosses, *everyone*. Harry was the little man who shouldn't have bothered being there.

At six o'clock in the morning, he was on his way to work. It wasn't quite dawn, yet, but the sky was at least turning gray and beginning to brighten. He didn't have to use his headlights, and his accountant's mind told him that even though that was a miniscule saving, it was a real one.

Harry lived in a northern suburb of Pittsburgh called Allison Park, the kind of place populated by alcoholic dentists and their warped, dysfunctional families, all of whom made a show of going to church every Sunday, to show what good Christians they were, and of putting campaign posters on their lawns every political season, to show they were good citizens. They weren't really either of those, but it never occurred to Harry to take them at anything other than face value.

There was not usually anyone else on the road when Harry left for the office each morning, extra early in the vain hope his boss would notice. But that morning Rev. Peter Welling of the Third United Methodist Church of Allison Park was out too, on his way to a clerical conference in downtown Pittsburgh. Like Harry, Rev. Welling wanted to impress his betters.

Allison Park was sufficiently rural for there to be rabbits, moles, and other small mammals. One of them—a raccoon, as a matter of fact—darted in front of Rev. Welling's car. He panicked, had a heart attack, and died instantly at the wheel.

But before his car could crash into a nearby tree, his eyes snapped open again. Coming down the road toward him was Harry Brandt's car. Rev. Welling, who was quite dead, took hold of the steering wheel, stepped on the accelerator, and drove head-on into Harry.

Their cars exploded into flame and Harry died even more painfully than his brother had, and certainly more so than Rev. Welling had.

There was enough of Rev. Welling's charred remains for the coroner to conclude he had had a heart attack at the wheel, which was accurate, and that that was what caused the collision, which was not.

By the time word about the accident spread, Josh's plane was approaching Cairo. There would be still another Brandt funeral. Neither he nor Jim wanted to return for it. Neither of them was even quite certain who Harry was. He occupied such a low place in their consciousness, in fact, that it didn't even occur to Josh that what he was beginning to think of as the Brandt Curse had struck again.

CHAPTER 11

"I want you to be careful what you say and do. You're in the Middle East, now, Josh." The Brandt Industries jet had just landed, in pre-dawn light, at a private airport outside Cairo. Josh had deplaned and arranged for his luggage to be sent to his hotel. Now the plane was just about to take off again, to shuttle Jim to his appointment in Damascus.

"I know that." Josh walked with Jim out onto the runway. He was mildly annoyed at what he took to be Jim's condescension.

"Things are done differently here."

"I was here a few weeks ago, remember? I don't think I fouled anything up too badly then, do you?"

"Ease off, Joshua. I just want you to understand that you're in a different culture. I wish you'd contacted me before you came here the last time. At the very least, I could have run interference between you and Ardath Bey."

"I'll be fine, Jim. Trust me."

"Indirectness is considered a measure of intelligence in this part of the world. You must think of everyone you meet here in much the same the way you would a business rival. You really should have called me, last time."

"Yes, Mother."

Jim laughed. "Look, I'll be back as soon as I can. Take care."

"You sound like you're talking to a schoolchild."

"Or to an American loose in a part of the world he doesn't understand. That comes to pretty much the same thing."

"I'll be perfectly fine, Jim." He said it with emphasis, hoping Jim would pick up on how annoyed he was.

"*Insh'allah.*"

"What?"

"Precisely. You see what I mean?"

Scowling, he waited till the plane taxied and took off, then got into the limo that was waiting to take him to the hotel. A light breakfast and a nap would be perfect. Then he wanted to see some of Cairo.

Exhausted from the flight, and drained by everything that had happened, he dreamed. There were pyramids with arms playing odd musical instruments while a line of mummies danced a wild belly dance.

Then loud, insistent knocking woke him. He opened the door of his suite and yawned. The man standing there was an Egyptian, in his thirties, and fairly good-looking. He was dressed in a good business suit and fez; Josh wondered fleetingly who his tailor might be. "Who are you?"

"You are Mr. Joshua Brandt?"

Josh's yawned again, in the man's face.

"Mr. Joshua Brandt, of the Pittsburgh Brandts?"

"I asked you who you are."

"Excuse me, please, Mr. Brandt. I am Ahmed Maqmir, of the Egyptian Antiquities Service."

Josh yawned a third time. He was in pajamas and robe. "Mr. Maqmir. What can I do for you?"

"Welcome back to Egypt, sir. We heard you were returning."

"From who?"

Maqmir ignored the question. "Your choice of hotels is excellent. The Mena House is the finest in Cairo. We were

wondering if perhaps you might like a guide to the sights of the city."

"I won't be here more than a day or two." The man was trying to soft-soap him. Everyone knew about the Mena House. It was the famous hotel that overlooked the Pyramids on the Giza Plateau. "My business associate will be joining me."

"There is a great deal to see, even in so short a time."

"I can see a good bit of it from the windows of my suite."

Still again Josh yawned. "What time is it?"

"It is almost noon, Mr. Brandt." The smirk on his face suggested that he had Josh's number, that only an American millionaire would sleep so late.

"My flight landed just before dawn, I need to sleep more."

"Perhaps you would be our guest for a late breakfast, sir?"

The man was not going to take no for an answer, and he obviously had something on his mind more substantial than sightseeing. Josh asked him in and gestured to a chair. "Let me get dressed. Would you like a drink?"

"We are forbidden alcohol."

"I forgot. Sorry." A strict Muslim. Josh hadn't met many who were so punctilious.

He took a quick shower, shaved, and got into a pair of slacks and a sports jacket, then rejoined Maqmir. Refreshed, he was ready to deal with the man—and with his department, if need be. "Now, Mr. Maqmir, what can I do for you?"

"May I take you to breakfast? The food here at the Mena House is excellent."

"I usually never eat breakfast. But coffee would be wonderful."

Maqmir led him downstairs to the hotel dining room, making cheerful, inconsequential small talk. The headwaiter seemed to recognize Maqmir and not Josh; Josh was mildly irritated. When they were seated, the waiter brought coffee at once. Josh inhaled the smell of it; the Egyptians made the best

coffee he'd ever had, strong and aromatic. When he tasted it, a smile spread across his face. "This is delicious."

"As I said, the Mena House has an excellent kitchen."

Josh looked around. "And it's such a beautiful hotel." He decided to do a bit of soft-soaping of his own. "Modern Islamic architecture is among the most beautiful in the world."

"Everything about modern Islam," Maqmir said pointedly, "is the best in the world."

"Yes, of course."

And so, quite abruptly, Maqmir dropped the cordial façade and got down to business. "We understand, Mr. Brandt, that you are interested in the tomb of Imhotep."

"Then you understand incorrectly." He sipped his coffee; it tasted better and better to him. "My dig has found the tomb of Princess Ankh-es-en-Amun. You should know. Your department issued the permit for the dig."

"But you have other archaeological interests, is that not the case?"

"I would appreciate it, Mr. Maqmir, if you would get to the point. Assuming you have one."

Maqmir smiled to show how distasteful he found Josh's bluntness. "Imhotep is a legendary figure, Mr. Brandt. Or perhaps I should say, half-legendary. There really was such a man, a scientist, inventor, and architect at the very dawn of Egyptian civilization. He served the Pharaoh Djoser. It was for that ruler that Imhotep devised the first pyramid ever built—the so-called Step Pyramid at Saqqara. Later generations revered him and even worshiped him as a god."

"He deserves his place in legend, then."

"In legend, yes. But hardly in the world of the present."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Mr. Maqmir."

"There is, Mr. Brandt, a certain strain of romanticism about the Egyptian past. Imhotep is one of the key figures in these

myths. There are stories to the effect that he will return from the dead one day and lead Egypt back to greatness. In these, he is much the same kind of figure as King Arthur, who according to legend will return one day and reign again in England."

"You're telling me that Imhotep is the Once and Future Mummy?" He laughed.

But Maqmir frowned. "I am attempting to make a serious point, Mr. Brandt."

"Sorry. And your point is—?"

"The present government of Egypt—in the present political climate—is not anxious for these myths to be revived or reinvigorated. There are firmer beliefs on which our people must build their hopes."

"I see." He did.

"And so—"

"Mr. Maqmir, as I told you, my interest in Imhotep is negligible. My team has found the tomb of Ankh-es-en-amun. Surely that should establish our bona fides."

"Ankh-es-en-Amun was the beloved of Imhotep, Mr. Brandt."

Josh had let that fact slip his mind; it had hardly seemed important. "Yes, but—but—but Ankh-es-en-Amun lived in a much later period than the man who built the first pyramid. Imhotep lived in the Old Kingdom, when Egyptian civilization was only beginning to take form. Ankh-es-en-amun lived a thousand years later, in the New Kingdom, when Egypt was at its height." He was pleased that he'd remembered enough Egyptian history to make the point.

"That is true, Mr. Brandt. As far as it goes."

"For a government official, Mr. Maqmir, you're being terribly cryptic."

"My apologies. I thought you had taken my point. The original Imhotep, the builder and scientist, lived in Old Kingdom Egypt, it is true. But he is a figure of legend, and was, even in

ancient times. He reappeared throughout the ages," Maqmir smiled. "And will appear again. Or so his followers believe."

"He has followers?" It seemed so odd.

"Not many."

Josh was beginning to lose patience. "Even if all this is true, what does it have to do with me? I'm not after Imhotep. And I've told you so several times."

"Indeed, sir, but your father—"

"My father is dead, Mr. Maqmir."

"Just so, Mr. Brandt." Abruptly he changed tack. "But we have gotten so very far from the subject at hand."

"Which is . . . ?"

"The Antiquities Service, and the Egyptian government, are quite keenly aware of the role of Brandt Industries in our economy, and in the economy of the entire Middle East. We should like to extend our hospitality to you, while you are in our country."

"I see." He drained his cup and signaled the waiter for a refill. "As I said, my associate, James Huntingdon, will be joining me here within a day or two. He knows Egypt very well. I'm sure he'll be able to get me oriented."

"When you were here previously, you traveled alone."

It made sense that they knew, he imagined—Siemens must be in touch with them all the time. "It was a hasty visit, and intended to be that way."

"You will be staying longer, this time?"

"That remains to be seen. Mr. Maqmir, I—"

"Please, sir, permit me to show you some of our ancient treasures. I can show you things most tourists never see. Things that even your cousin could not gain access to."

So they knew that Jim was his cousin, too. It was a matter of public record, of course, but Josh was beginning to feel uncomfortably out of his depth. And Maqmir was more

determined to guide him around the city than seemed quite reasonable. He decided the best way to find out exactly what the man wanted was to go along with him. At the very least, it should get him an interesting tour of Cairo.

And so, reluctantly, he agreed to let Maqmir show him the sights.

Their first stop was the Egyptian Museum, on Liberation Square in the heart of Cairo. The building was thronged with tourists, but Maqmir had the air of a man used to authority; he cleared a way through the crowd as if it was second nature to him.

He showed Josh the burial treasures of Tutankhamen, which were even more beautiful, and more genuinely magnificent, than Josh expected. "I have a vague memory of seeing them when I was a boy, But I really didn't remember how wonderful they are."

And there was a great deal more—dazzling jewelry, magnificent colossi of the pharaohs, the silver burial equipment of queens and princes . . . One room was devoted to royal mummies. Ramses the Great—his body covered with a purple pall—Seti I, the warrior-king Thutmose III, and many more. Josh was certain he'd visited the museum as a boy, but he had virtually no specific memories of it. He was duly dazzled.

In one display case he saw a small wooden sculpture about six inches in length. It was of a bird—the body was like a crow or a robin—but its head was that of a human being. It was a three-dimensional rendering of the creature in the amulet Siemens had sent him.

"This interests you?"

Josh said that it did. "It's called the . . . the . . ."

"The *ba*. It represents the human soul."

"Yes. Exactly. And it's supposed to bring protection from harm, right?

"Not exactly, Mr. Brandt. That would be a simplification. It symbolized the highest, the most ethereal aspirations a human being can reach."

"Someone told me it was for protection."

"No, as I said . . ." Maqmir nodded slightly, a polite little gesture of deference. Then, with unsettling directness, he looked Josh in the eye and said, "There is a passage in the ancient *Book of Anubis*, the bible for his priests and worshipers. 'Death feeds life tenfold. The dead create the living ten times ten.'"

"Is that supposed to mean something?"

"The living world depends on the world of the dead, Mr. Brandt. In a great many ways." Then he seemed to realize he was saying something he shouldn't. He smiled an artificial smile. "Or so the ancients believed."

They had been in the museum for three hours—three hours of fairly intense sightseeing. "If you don't mind, Mr. Maqmir, I'm feeling a bit hungry. Might we call it a day, please?"

"There is a great deal more to see."

"I know it, but as I said, I really need to get something to eat."

Maqmir took Josh's arm and led him toward a descending staircase. "Please, I must insist on showing you one more object."

"But—"

"This is special. And it will not take long."

The staircase went down into darkness. There were electric lights strung along one side of it, tiny clear bulbs, but they barely seemed to penetrate the shadows.

Seeing the blackness below, Josh recoiled. "Where are you taking me?"

Maqmir smiled. "Downstairs."

"Why?"

"There are other things, rare things, things the public never gets to see."

"Should I feel honored?"

"That is up to you, Mr. Brandt." He took an even firmer grip on Josh's arm.

"Oh." There was no point struggling, Josh decided; it would be best to simply get it over with.

The basement was dim; those lights were strung even farther apart than they were on the staircase. And it was honeycombed with corridors and chambers, not all of them well lit. After a few moments of following Maqmir, Josh was quite disoriented. He wasn't certain whether to say so; his guide was already several squares ahead of him, it seemed. From his pocket, Maqmir produced a small flashlight, which wasn't much more help against the gloom than the electric lights were.

Finally they came to a padlocked steel door. Maqmir got a set of keys out of his pocket and opened the lock. The room was pitch black. "This way, Mr. Brandt."

There was a light switch. Impulsively, Josh threw it, but the lights that came on were as dim as the ones in the corridor.

The walls were lined with sarcophagi. There were two dozen of them, propped up, standing ready to be opened. In the center of the room was a pair of small folding tables. On one of them, a rat was sleeping. When Maqmir's light hit it, it woke, wide-eyed in alarm, jumped off the table, and scuttled behind one of the coffins.

Maqmir scanned the rest of the room with his flashlight and lowered his voice. "It has crawled into the walls. But here, there is one particular sarcophagus. Let me show you."

The beam of his light swept down the length of a coffin. It was badly battered. Josh had the impression it had been ornately decorated once, but that the decorations had been hacked off. The one symbol remaining was of a jackal-headed man.

Josh recognized it. He pointed to it and said, "Anubis."

"Anubis. Exactly. The dread Lord of the Dead. The most powerful of the Egyptian gods."

"I thought that was Osiris."

"Osiris died, too." He shined the beam on his own face and smiled.

Then slowly, carefully, Maqmir removed the lid of the coffin and propped it against a table. In the dim light, Josh had trouble making out the features of the mummy inside it. But gradually, his eyes adjusted.

It was like no mummy he had ever seen, certainly like none of the others in the museum. Its head was twisted to one side. There were no bandages about the face; only the body was wrapped, apparently quite tightly. The mummy's dried, wrinkled skin looked like old leather; bits of it seemed to be flaking off. Worse yet, the man had died, it seemed, in complete agony. His muscles were knotted and contorted; he had struggled against the confining bandages. His face was twisted with pain. The eyes gaped wide, the mouth was open, and the tongue protruded as if the man had died in the middle of a scream or a cry.

The sight of a man who had died that way rattled Josh completely, and he stepped quickly back and away from it.

Maqmir, characteristically, was smiling. "No one knows what crime led to this horrible punishment, Mr. Brandt. The style of the coffin and the wrappings suggest the time of one of the later Ramseses, the twentieth dynasty. There are stories that a prince of the royal house plotted treason. It is thought that this may be his mummy." He ran a finger lightly down the edge of the sarcophagus. "Or, to be more precise, these may be his remains. This man was wrapped in linen—bandaged—then buried alive. Come closer. Examine the lines in his face. Inspect the body—there are none of the usual incisions for embalming. It is quite fascinating, really."

Josh didn't move. "No thank you."

"Really, Mr. Brandt, very few visitors ever see this. You should be flattered."

"I am. Can we go now?"

"Please, take a careful look. These ancient things can teach us a great many lessons."

"What could I possibly learn from a thing like this, except how not to die?"

Maqmir took a step back away from the coffin. Josh, not wanting to seem a coward in front of his Egyptian host, took a step toward it, then another.

And in the shifting beam from Maqmir's flashlight, the mummy moved. Its hand reached out. Its dead eyes opened and stared at Josh.

Or so it seemed, at first. Josh decided it was a trick of the light.

Maqmir pointed the light at his own face again and laughed. "Is something wrong, Mr. Brandt?" Except for the light on his face, the room was completely dark.

Then Josh felt something catch hold of the leg of his slacks. Something else came to rest on his forearm. He cried out softly, "Oh, my god!"

Maqmir laughed softly and said, "Or mine." His light went out.

Then Josh screamed, loudly enough for it to echo through the room. For a panicked instant Josh expected Maqmir to shut him in and lock the door.

Then Maqmir switched on his light again and pointed it at Josh. A large gray rat had sunk its teeth into his pants leg and was tugging at it furiously. Another one had jumped, somehow, onto his arm. He shook it violently, and it went flying across the room. Then he kicked the one at his feet. It let out a hiss and ran away into the darkness.

Josh caught the corner of a table and steadied himself. He was breathing heavily. "For an instant I thought—I thought I saw that mummy—but it couldn't have."

"Couldn't have? Couldn't have done what, precisely, Mr. Brandt?"

"It looked like it—never mind." Unwilling to seem any more foolish or timid, Josh dropped the subject. "Can we please go back upstairs now?"

"Yes, of course." Not hiding his amusement, Maqmir replaced the sarcophagus cover and headed to the doorway. "If you please, Mr. Brandt." Josh followed.

In the corridor, Maqmir locked the room. "What you have just seen is a rare object, Mr. Brandt. But it is hardly the only one of its kind."

"Why are you telling me this?" The . . . the grotesque thing he'd just seen could hardly be part of the standard VIP tour.

"Come with me, please. I should like to show you Saqqara. It is only a short drive west of the city."

"No thank you, Mr. Maqmir. I want to get back to my hotel and have a late lunch. Or an early dinner. And there may be messages for me."

"Saqqara was the burial ground of Memphis, the ancient capital. I can show you the Step Pyramid, which was constructed by Imhotep." In an ominous tone he added, "And I can show you his tomb."

"Thank you, but I've had quite enough of death for one afternoon."

"Saqqara is a fascinating place. Imhotep was buried not far from the pyramid—in eternal sight of the pharaoh he served."

"But he became a god himself, in time, isn't that right? Exactly like 'his' pharaoh?" Josh looked at his watch. "One

way or the other, it's getting late. And I'm starving. Thank you for the tour, Mr. Maqmir, but I really want to get back to my hotel."

Maqmir shook his head in a sadder-but-wiser gesture, and said "Very well." He led Josh back up to the museum's entry hall. The museum was even more crowded than it had been earlier. Throngs of tourists—Germans, Italians, Americans, even some Japanese—were milling everywhere. The crush was fairly overwhelming. From the main entrance, Josh saw a long line of sightseeing buses. He was glad he'd passed on the offer of more touring.

"Can you find your way back to the Mena House?"

"Yes, thank you. I'll get a cab. And thank you again for the guided tour." He tried to make it sound as if he meant it. But he wasn't at all certain that he did.

The Weingarten funeral was handled by DeCirrico's, an exclusive mortuary in Sherman Oaks. Rather than undergo the ordeal of two separate services, Louise and Ari had decided to have their children buried simultaneously, side by side in Ari's family plot.

As usual, there had been family tensions, Ari's relatives wanting a Jewish service, Lou a Catholic one. They had finally decided on a simple, non-denominational burial, with a priest and a rabbi sharing the duties jointly, which made no one happy but the two holy men, each of whom would receive full payment.

The service began at precisely the time Josh was in the basement of the Egyptian Museum with Maqmir. Lou and Ari left their home for the mortuary; she was crying and could not stop.

Friends, relatives—Ari's not Lou's—were gathered, but none of them much wanted to be there. It was an unstated assumption among them that the kids had caused their own death, flying recklessly, maybe even flying while they were stoned. No one had the bad grace to say so to the grieving parents.

When their rented black limo pulled up and they stepped out, Louise lost it completely. At that moment it became irrevocably clear to her that her children were dead, really dead, finally, incontrovertibly dead.

Ari consulted quietly with the priests and the funeral-home operators. "Can we please have one last moment alone with them, before—before—"

"Of course." Father Connor and Rabbi Silverstein looked at one another knowingly. The family had dependency problems.

Ari and Lou stepped into the room where their son Tom lay in his casket. Theo was in the adjoining room. Ronald DeCirrico closed the doors discreetly behind them and looked at his watch. They could spend five minutes alone with their dead children without throwing the schedule off too badly.

The mourners milled about and talked among themselves. Connor and Silverstein worked the room for donations. The mortician stood in a corner and glanced at his watch every few seconds.

Then came the screams. At first it was only Louise's voice, and everyone assumed she was hysterical at the loss of her children. Then Ari's voice mixed with hers, crying out even more horribly.

Embarrassed, not quite knowing what to do, the undertaker and the priests looked at one another and avoided the eyes of the assembled mourners.

DeCirrico asked awkwardly, "Should I . . . ?"

Father Connor nodded uncertainly.

Slowly and quite self-consciously, DeCirrico opened the door to the parlor. He and the two holy men stepped in. Louise and Ari Weingarten had been torn to pieces. Blood and body parts were splattered everywhere.

For a moment the three of them stood perfectly still, in shock. Then they looked at one another. But no words came to any of them. They stepped into the parlor, stunned at the horrible sight, and DeCirrico quickly closed the doors behind them.

There was no sign of anyone who might have committed these dreadful murders.

Tom and Theo rested serenely in their coffins. There were drops of blood on them, but no one made anything of it. Blood was everywhere, on everything.

The dining room at the Hilton was nearly empty when Josh ordered a sixteen-ounce steak, medium rare. It was still early, and there weren't many diners. But the steak was succulent, prepared with some unexpected combination of spices he found especially good.

When he finished eating, he wanted to go back up to his room and get a nap; Maqmir had interrupted a lovely, sound sleep, and he needed more.

But first, he decided to call Siemens, to let him know he was back in the country.

"Professor? This is Josh Brandt."

"Mr. Brandt—Josh. How are you?"

"I'm in Cairo, actually."

"You're back?"

Josh explained that he'd be heading to Luxor again as soon as his associate joined him. "I'm anxious to see you all again. How's the work going?"

"Well, we've managed to sift through all the damage Colin's killer did. There were actually a few good objects left untouched or only slightly damaged. So the season won't be a total loss."

It came as pleasant news for Josh, the first he'd had in a while. "I'd think that finding the tomb would be important, in and of itself."

"It is, it is. But having a few good artifacts, that's the icing on the cake."

"I'm so glad things have gone at least that well. Are people getting over . . . what happened?"

"Most of us, yes. Some more than others. You must understand how shaken we all were."

"Believe me, I was, too. Anyway, I'll be staying at the Winter Palace again. As I said, I should be there in another two or three days."

"We'll all look forward to seeing you."

"Likewise. I'll call you when I arrive. Oh—and, Dr. Siemens?"

"Yes?"

"I wanted to thank you for that lovely amulet you sent."

There was an odd pause. Then Siemens said, "Amulet? I didn't send you any amulet. Exporting an ancient object would be illegal."

"But . . . there was an export certificate with it, from the Antiquities Service."

"It didn't come from me."

The note had Siemens's signature. Josh was sure he was remembering right.

"I'll ask around," Siemens said. "Maybe someone else sent it and used my name."

"Should they have done that?"

Before Siemens could answer, Josh's call waiting told him someone else was trying to reach him. He checked the caller's number. It was his mother.

"Excuse me, doctor. I have to take another call."

"I'll see you soon, then."

Josh switched to his mother. "Yes, Mother, what is it?"

"I really wish you wouldn't use that exasperated tone with me, Joshua."

"Then stop being exasperating all the time. What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought you'd want to know that your sister is dead, that's all."

"Steph?!" He went numb. He let himself fall back onto the bed. "Oh my god, what happened?"

"Not Stephanie. She is still in the hospital wing, bellowing something no one can understand. I mean Louise."

"Lou? What happened?"

"If I thought you were going to use that tone with me, I wouldn't have bothered to call."

"Tell me what happened, Mother."

She took a deep breath and, he suspected, a drink. Then she told him what she knew about Lou and Ari's deaths, which wasn't much. "That's all anyone would tell me, Joshua. I think the funeral directors may be afraid of a lawsuit."

"Find out more. Find out everything you can. I want to know everything, exactly as it took place."

"That's all they'd tell me. I've already told you that."

"I'd think you'd want to know more about your own daughter's death. But never mind, Mother dear, I'll get one of our lawyers on it."

"Do that. Oh, and Joshua?"

"Yes, Mother, what else?"

"There *is* one bit of news about Stephanie."

"What?"

There was one of Claudia's dramatic pauses. "She's pregnant."

"What!?"

"The doctor says she's in her fourth or fifth month."

"Mother, I—"

She hung up. Josh tried getting her back, but she wouldn't answer. The number at the nurse's station wasn't programmed into his phone, and he didn't remember it. He muttered, "Damn."

Could Claudia have been lying? Who could have . . . ? It must have been one of the security guards. At this distance, there was probably no way to find out which.

"Damn it." This time he shouted it.

There was no chance of him getting any more sleep, not after that news. He called the legal department at Brandt Industries and asked the top lawyer to look into what had happened to Lou and Ari. Then he changed into a fresh pair of slacks and a clean shirt and decided to go out and explore the city.

The streets were crowded, as much with tourists as with Egyptians. Josh browsed in a silversmith's shop for a few minutes, checked out a place that sold legally exportable antiquities to tourists, then found his way to a nightclub with belly dancers and bad Egyptian wine.

The music sounded odd to his ear, loud and discordant. But the dancers captivated him. After his third glass of wine, he found himself thinking that his grandfather hadn't been such a fool, after all. Then, after only a few more minutes, the wine and the noise and the day's awful news combined to make him sullen.

But the curse, the Brandt curse . . .

There was a pair of Australian tourists at the next table. He leaned over to them and said, "We're all dead."

They could tell he had had too much to drink, so they ignored him and hoped he'd stop.

He repeated, more loudly, "All of us, we're dead. Cursed."

When they continued to ignore him, he got out his cell phone and called Jim's number. Jim's voice mail picked up.

"Jim, this is Josh. Things are out of control. I don't know what to do. Come here as soon as you can. Forget about business. We're all cursed."

CHAPTER 12

At nine the next morning, Josh awoke with a hangover. He stumbled into the bathroom to shave and shower, and wished he'd drunk less. The wine hadn't even been good, but he'd kept drinking it, and now he had the foulest taste in his mouth. While he was toweling off, he called room service and ordered a black coffee and an English-language newspaper.

He checked his voice mail. There was a message from Jim. "Josh, I don't know what's wrong, but you know I'm negotiating that pipeline deal. I'll be there tomorrow." There was a brief pause, then Jim added, "This drama queen stuff isn't like you. You're not starting to turn into your mother, are you? I'll see you soon."

Josh sat on the bed and buried his face in his hands. It was only by an act of concentration that he was able to remember calling Jim at all.

He checked the morning newspaper, but there was nothing much of interest in it. He had hoped, in a vague way, that there might be some details about what happened to Lou and Ari. But there was no reason why the international press would have taken notice of a story like that.

Next, Josh called Brandt Industries headquarters and conferred with the head of the legal department. No, they hadn't been able to get any more news about what had happened than Claudia had. Yes, they'd do what they could to get to the bottom of it. It might take a day or two; they'd get back to him.

He finished his coffee, did his morning exercises, and decided he was ready to deal with the world.

It was nearly noon. The drapes were drawn; he opened them, and brilliant Egyptian sunlight flooded the room. Outside, the pyramids were almost blindingly bright. It took his eyes a few moments to adjust.

Jim would join him tomorrow. Jim would know how to deal with the Egyptians; he should never have come alone. These solo trips tended to get him in over his head, even if he didn't quite understand in *what*.

He decided he wanted to do some more sightseeing. And he felt the need to apologize to Maqmir for his behavior yesterday; he had let the dark, close atmosphere of the museum basement get to him.

"Antiquities Service." Josh's call was answered by a young man, from the sound of his voice.

"Good morning. This is Mr. Joshua Brandt. May I speak to Mr. Maqmir, please."

"Who?"

"Mr. Maqmir. He showed me around the Egyptian Museum yesterday, and I was hoping—"

"I'm sorry, sir, there is no one of that name in the Antiquities Service."

"But—"

"Is there someone else who might help you?"

"I don't know anyone else there," he stammered. "I'm financing the dig of Professor Walter Siemens, in Luxor."

"I see. Will you hold, please?"

He held. Three minutes later, another voice came on. "This is Mr. Robert Ali. May I ask for whom you are calling, please?"

Josh re-introduced himself. "Yesterday, your Mr. Maqmir met me at my hotel and offered to show me some of the ancient sites. I was hoping—"

"Mr. whom?"

"Maqmir."

"There is no one named Maqmir in the Antiquities Service, sir. Are you certain you are remembering correctly?"

"Quite certain."

"Then you have been the victim of some sort of prank, Mr. Brandt."

"Oh." Josh went a bit numb. "I see."

"If you could perhaps provide us with information about this man—how you met him, where we can reach him . . . It is a serious offence to impersonate a government official."

"He . . . he came to my hotel room." As he said it, he realized how foolish it must sound.

"And he had government identification?"

"No. No, he didn't."

"I see." From the tone of his voice, Ali saw only too well.

"May I be of some assistance to you myself, Mr. Brandt?"

"No." He sat down on the bed. Everything—*everything*—was looking more and more ominous to him. What was happening to him and his family? "No, thank you. I—I—I'll hire a private guide."

A moment later he dialed Jim's cell number again. And again, Jim's voice mail picked up.

"Jim, this is Josh. Sorry about that message last night. You're right, I was drunk. But Jim, something's wrong. I should have listened to you when you told me I might be in over my head here. Please, dispose of whatever business you have and get here as soon as you can." He was about to hang up when, on impulse, he added, with an uncharacteristic note of pleading, "Please, Jim."

Josh headed down to the hotel dining room and had a light breakfast. Then he checked with the concierge, who was able to recommend a professional guide who, he assured Josh, was both reliable and independent.

"I need someone who is incorruptible."

The concierge seemed a bit puzzled by it but assured him this man was quite dependable. "Shall I call him for you, sir?"

"Please."

Half an hour later, the guide showed up. His name was Tariq Ali, and he was a short, plump man who smiled more than seemed quite appropriate to Josh. Since Josh was an American, it never occurred to him that Ali's constant amusement was the result of dealing with American tourists.

"Is there anything special you'd like to see, Mr. Brandt?"

Josh gestured at the dining room's picture window, in which the Great Pyramid was magnificently framed. "Well, obviously I want to see everything here on the Giza Plateau. Then the ruins of ancient Memphis."

"There is not much remaining of Memphis, sir. Cairo was built over its ruins. There is a fallen colossus of Ramses the Great, a few alabaster sphinxes, and a few other, less interesting objects. You can see all of it in ten minutes or less."

"I see. And what about Saqqara?"

"Ah, Saqqara. There, Mr. Brandt, you could spend a full day and still have more to see. It is one of the richest sites in the country."

"Saqqara it will be, then."

So Josh spent the day examining the wonders of Egypt's ancient past. The pyramids and the tomb complexes around them dazzled him; the view from the Mena House windows had barely done them justice. The Sphinx, even in its current eroded condition, seemed like a mute god to Josh, staring impassively over the heads of humanity, unmoved and uncaring. It was not at all a reassuring image, but it fascinated him.

Then Ali drove him through the heart of Cairo and into the western desert, to the burial ground of the ancient capital. In the distance to their right, the Giza pyramids loomed; miles away, they still dominated the horizon.

On the road ahead, Josh saw the Step Pyramid loom up, brilliant in desert sunlight. Gradually, more and more pyramids appeared on the horizon. Some were large, others not so large; some were intact, some ruined. This was like no landscape he had ever seen, and he was reminded still again that he was a long way from the world he knew and had mastered. There wasn't a mansion or a boardroom in sight. It was simultaneously fascinating and a bit unsettling.

"How many pyramids are there?"

"Within what radius, sir?"

He wasn't sure what to say.

But Ali began his tour-guide patter. "There, off to the south, you see those two pyramids not far from one another? They are among the earliest. The one to the right was built by Khufu's father. So was the other one."

"He needed two?" Josh shaded his eyes and took a careful look. "The one on the left looks crooked."

"And so it is, Mr. Brandt. It is called the Bent Pyramid. They were building it at too steep an angle, and it collapsed during construction. So they completed it at a much gentler angle."

They had reached the Step Pyramid complex. Ali parked at some distance from the pyramid itself. While pulling to a stop, he faced Josh and added, "Far too many of our ancient monuments have collapsed under the weight of time. Money for restoration is sadly hard to come by."

Josh got out of the car, stretched and found himself gaping at the enormous structure before him. "So that's it?"

"Yes, sir. The oldest stone building in the world."

For some reason he wasn't sure of, Josh couldn't take his eyes off it. It was not as large as the ones at Giza, but it was more than large enough to be impressive. It rose in a series of steps, as its name implied; it was made of small stone blocks, much smaller than the ones in the Great Pyramid and its

neighbors. And the complex was surrounded by a stone wall, some twelve feet tall.

Josh took it all in. "I think I like this more than the ones at Giza," he told Ali.

"Many people do. Come, let me show you close up."

The entry through the stone wall was a long, covered, columned arcade. Josh tried to take everything in as they walked its length. The columns were light and delicate, almost gracefully Greek, and not at all the kind of blunt, heavy architecture Josh associated with Egypt. He said so to Ali.

"Exactly, sir. Where do you think the Greeks got the idea for all those famous columns that front their temples and palaces? The shadow of the architect Imhotep has reached down through history."

It was a new thought. So much had flowed from this building, so much civilization had derived from Egypt . . . Josh had never quite appreciated it before. In his mind, ancient Egypt had been a curiosity, a setting for shlock movies and not much more. But this—*this very place*—had been one of the fountainheads of human civilization. And that knowledge was lost to most people.

They reached the end of the arcade and stepped into a broad, enormous courtyard. The pyramid stood at the far end. The interior wall had more columns engaged in it. Here and there along its perimeter were openings into small buildings. Ali explained that they were temples to the gods that were special to the pharaoh and to Imhotep.

Imhotep. Josh froze. Had the man really designed and built this place?

Ali seemed not to notice his reaction; he went on with his lecture. "There, at the far end, is a small shrine to Anubis, the great God of the Dead. You have seen his image, sir? A lean, vital young man with the head of a jackal."

"Yes, I've seen it."

"Jackals were the devourers of the dead."

"Yes."

The talk was not going anywhere Josh wanted it to. "Can we move closer to the pyramid, please?"

They did so. At one place, part of the lowest "step" was crumbling; stones littered the ground below it. At the far side, there was a tiny shrine containing a statue of the pharaoh Djoser.

Josh studied it. "He looks cold."

"He was a living god." Ali shrugged. "What would you expect?"

"Can we see the interior of the pyramid?"

"It is closed to the public, sir, I'm afraid. But . . ." He let his voice trail off, and a cryptic smile crossed his face.

"But?"

"One of the resident archaeologists is a cousin of mine. For a small *baksheesh*—say, fifty pounds—I believe we may gain admission."

Josh got out his wallet and handed him a fifty-pound note. Ali walked briskly out of the compound, leaving Josh alone. Josh decided to take another look at Djoser. He felt foolish doing it, but he had an irrational conviction the pharaoh's face might reveal something to him. The shrine that held the statue was made of some yellowish stone. On one side, part of the stone had been removed and replaced with a sheet of Plexiglas, so visitors could see the statue; otherwise it would have been completely enclosed. But Josh noticed that there were two holes cut into the stone directly in front of the statue's eyes: it could, at least in the ancients' belief, see the outside world.

A few minutes later, Ali was back. Smiling broadly, he held up a set of keys. "My cousin hopes you will find the pyramid rewarding to visit."

He led Josh to a padlocked metal door. The first key he tried opened it; clearly, this was something he had done before. Josh wondered how much of the *baksheesh* got kicked back to him, not that it mattered. American officials were just as available.

Inside, the stone floor sloped sharply down. Ali threw a switch and a line of bright electric lights came on. Then he took a lantern and lit it; it struck Josh as redundant. Without saying a word, Ali walked down the passage, leaving Josh to follow him.

"This was built—when?" Josh asked. His voice echoed softly.

"Four and a half thousand years ago. Not many tourists are permitted entry. I hope you are pleased, Mr. Brandt."

"Quite pleased, thank you."

"The entrance to the pyramid was found by the Cairo branch of a famous family of tomb robbers. Perhaps you have heard of them—the Abd-er-Rasuls?"

It served to remind Josh one thing he wanted to do in Luxor. But he decided to be indirect with Ali. "I think I heard something about them once."

"They are quite well known. There have been generations of them, and they are still active in the antiquities trade."

"They must know a good thing when they see it."

"Exactly, sir."

They reached the bottom of the downward ramp. The stone walls were highly polished, decorated with rows of little gods and thousand of hieroglyphs.

Josh recognized some of them—the more familiar ones, Isis, Osiris, Horus. He even traced their outlines with a fingertip. But there was one that seemed quite incongruous. It was a small male figure, apparently a deformed dwarf. He asked Ali who it represented.

"That is Bes, sir. The god who presided over childbirth."

"He doesn't look like any of the others."

Ali shrugged and walked on.

A maze of corridors seemed to branch off in every direction. Even with the lights, it would have been simple to get lost. Ali held his lantern aloft and said, "This way."

"Do you really need that?"

He said nothing, just walked ahead of Josh.

Before long they came to a place where the walls were covered with lovely turquoise blue tiles. A recess in the wall contained a stone sarcophagus. "This is where the pharaoh was buried, Mr. Brandt."

"Is his body still in the coffin?"

"No." Ali's line of chatter seemed to fail him. "Tomb robbers."

That was that, it seemed.

"And over here"—he gestured to a side passage—"a hundred yards down this corridor is the original tomb of Imhotep. He had the honor of being interred near the pharaoh he served."

"He was buried in the pyramid complex?"

"As I said, sir."

"But—but—" There was something odd in what Ali had said, and it took Josh a moment to put his finger on it. "What do you mean, his *original* tomb?"

"According to legend, Imhotep retuned from the grave time and again throughout history, to make certain the civilization he helped establish was still flourishing."

"That isn't possible."

Ali smiled, another one of this cryptic grins. "Imhotep became a god, Mr. Brandt. The ancients worshiped and revered him. Who can say what is possible with such a mystical being?"

"I thought Imhotep was supposed to be the high priest of Anubis or something."

"Yes, he served the god of the dead."

"But if he was a god himself—"

Ali shrugged. "Why should a god not serve another god?" He paused, then asked, "Would you like to see his burial place?"

Suddenly, Josh wanted out. This talk—returning from the dead, and mystical beings—was the last thing he needed to hear. He asked Ali to lead him up to the surface again.

"As you wish, sir. But I think you would find Imhotep's tomb especially interesting. Of the few tourists who are permitted entry to the pyramid, even fewer see Imhotep's first resting place."

Imhotep. Every instinct told Josh to leave. But it struck him there might be a chance, however remote, that seeing it might tell him something, might give him some clue to what had been happening. Reluctantly, not at all sure of himself, he said, "Okay, let's go."

Ali led him down still another sloping corridor, narrower than the first one. Their walk was taking forever, and it occurred to Josh that they must be hundreds of feet below the surface by now. The lights were strung much father apart; Ali's lamp was now the primary source of light, and Josh was glad he'd brought it. The walls were quite bare, no hieroglyphs or gods cut into them, and none of those bright blue tiles. The air became thick and heavy; Josh had trouble breathing.

But Ali strode onward, quiet and confident. The corridor turned right, left, every which way, and others branched off of it, but he knew where he was going, or seemed to.

Finally the walls came even closer together; they scraped Josh's shoulders. And they were rough, not smooth, not polished. They might have been cut from some quarry only yesterday and left unfinished. Or cut directly into the bedrock. Either way, it had still been an enormous expenditure of time and energy.

Then, finally, at the very end of the lowest passage, they came upon a recess cut into the stone. It held a massive sarcophagus, cut in red granite as rough and unfinished as the walls. There was no lid, but a few large fragments of stone littered the floor nearby; Josh decided the tomb robbers—or archaeologists or whoever—had broken the top of the coffin to pieces,

to get at what was inside. It must have been done thousands of years ago.

Ali whispered, "This is the place, Mr. Brandt. The burial place of Imhotep, the emblematic god of Egyptian progress, power, and civilization."

Josh was feeling more and more uneasy. But he decided it would be a mistake to let Ali see that. "You'd think he could have done better for himself, wouldn't you?"

"He was buried near his pharaoh. What could be better than that?"

"You've got me, Ali." He reached out and ran a hand along the rim of the sarcophagus. "Why is it rough? Why didn't they finish it?"

Ali smiled. "Perhaps because Egypt itself was unfinished at the time?"

There was something in the air. Something faint, indistinct. Green mist curled around them, seeming to emanate from the stone itself. Josh waved a hand in front of his face, to try and dispel it.

He had seen it before, more than once. He remembered where, all too well.

"Ali, I'm feeling terribly claustrophobic. Can we get out of here, please?"

But before Ali could answer, the mist thickened. Josh waved again, trying to see through it. But when a patch cleared in the heart of it, what he saw was Stephanie, lying naked in her bed. And Ardath Bey was there with her, making love to her. The sound of his laughter came softly to Josh's ears.

"Ali, I want to leave!"

"Yes, sir." He seemed genuinely puzzled by Josh's reaction to the place. Clearly, he was not seeing and hearing what Josh was.

They stepped off, heading back up the corridor. Josh, disoriented, put a hand on Ali's shoulder and let him lead the way.

Almost at once, the mist seemed to dissipate. But Josh thought he heard faint laughter in the air, the same laughter he had heard once before in Luxor. It was the voice of Ardath Bey.

Ten minutes later, they were back at the pyramid's entrance. The sunlight was blindingly bright, and it took Josh's eyes a moment to adjust. He leaned against the stones of the pyramid and took deep breaths of fresh air. "Get me back to my hotel, will you?"

Ali, was grinning sardonically. "Please, Mr. Brandt, there is no reason to be self-conscious. You are not the first tourist to feel claustrophobic in an Egyptian tomb."

"No, it isn't that. I really think I'd like to get back to the Mena House, if you don't mind."

"There is a great deal more to see here, Mr. Brandt. More pyramids, shaft tombs, marvelous ancient causeways in stone . . ."

He was calming down, and the fresh air was reinvigorating him. But he needed to get away from dead places, and he said so.

"Are you sure, Mr. Brandt?"

"Quite sure."

They left the Step Pyramid complex, and Ali drove Josh back to his hotel. There wasn't much talk between them on the drive; now and then Ali pointed out a fragment of something ancient and badly ruined, that was all.

CHAPTER 13

At the Mena House, Josh found Jim waiting for him. Seeing him seemed to dispel the last of what he had been feeling at Saqqara. Impulsively, Josh threw his arms around him in a bear hug. "I didn't expect you till tomorrow, at the earliest."

"What can I say?" Jim laughed. "I'm an efficient businessman."

"It must be genetic. Are you hungry? The restaurant here does a good steak."

"All I've had all day is airline food." He made a sour face. "On Egypt Air. Have you ever tried airline hummus?"

"Come on, I'll buy you a porterhouse."

It was early for dinner, and the restaurant was nearly empty. The staff fussed over them. Jim and Josh ordered and made small talk for a few minutes. Jim brought him up to date on the progress of the business deals he'd worked on. The waiter brought them cocktails.

"Have you checked in?"

Jim nodded. "I'm just down the hall from you."

"Good. But we need to head to Luxor as soon as possible."

"Why the hurry? I thought you wanted to see Cairo."

"No." He said it firmly. "We need to get to the bottom of this business with Ardath Bey. And he's in Luxor."

"How do you know?"

"That's where I met him before."

"Josh, this—"

"Steph's pregnant."

Jim's expression froze. "You're not suggesting that Ardath Bey—"

"No. They're saying she's in her fourth or fifth month. There's no way he could have—" He couldn't finish the sentence.

"But he's dogging me, Jim." Josh told him about Maqmir and his attempt to frighten him at the museum.

"Wow." Jim whistled. "You're right, there's something strange going on. But none of it really adds up. I mean, why would he be doing this? What can he want?"

"Brandt Industries? Or at least our Middle Eastern holdings?"

"It makes as much sense as anything else, I guess. But what—"

The waiter brought their steaks and a bottle of Egyptian red wine. Both of them fell silent and ate.

Josh was uncertain how much more to tell him. Then he decided there was no point holding back. "I was at Saqqara today. I saw the tomb of Imhotep."

"With this Maqmir character?"

"No, I booked a guide through the concierge. Something made me want to see the place. The name Imhotep keeps cropping up, again and again. With my grandfather, with Dad, and now . . . I think I needed to see something solid, something concrete."

"And did it help?"

"Not much, no. I saw—I had a vision—I—"

"You're letting this stuff get to you, Josh. You've always been one of the more level-headed people in our family." He took a long drink of wine. "One of the few."

"I think Ardath Bey is trying to spook me with all this talk about Imhotep." He sipped his wine. "He's raising up this ancient boogeyman, playing with my head. I wish I knew why. But we need to get to Luxor. That's where the answer is."

Jim raised his glass in a little toast. "If it's anywhere. There's a train to Luxor first thing in the morning, if I recall."

"Can't we go tonight?"

"Train's the best way to travel in Egypt. You don't want to discover what the national airline's like. Besides, it's not a long ride, and there's a lot to see."

They finished dinner, and Josh had the concierge book them a compartment on the next morning's Luxor train. "And reserve a suite for us at the Winter Palace, too."

"The Winter Palace, sir?" He didn't try to hide his disapproval. "That is such an old hotel. Most Americans prefer someplace modern."

"My father used to stay there, and so did I, when I was a boy. And I've stayed there myself, recently." He smiled. "I like it."

"Very well, sir."

Jim and Josh showered and changed. Jim took him to a night spot he knew and liked. It was much like the one he'd visited the previous night.

"Is there a club in Cairo that doesn't have belly dancers?"

"If there is, I haven't looked for it."

They got back to the hotel late and slightly drunk, left wake-up calls, and headed to their respective rooms.

Jim slept deeply and well.

Josh kept having dreams: he saw Ardath Bey and Stephanie locked in passionate lovemaking.

The morning sun was brilliant, the air crisp and cool. The Cairo train station was a magnificent belle époque building, all glass and ironwork. Josh decided he liked it. "It's like something you'd see in Paris."

"The French ruled here for quite some time, remember?" Jim kept watching the women. "Thank God they don't wear veils here, anymore."

The train was operated by Wagons Lit. Jim explained it was the same company that used to operate the Orient Express. Their compartment was, for a compartment in an old train, quite comfortable, almost luxurious. The upholstery was plush, the furnishings antique, and there was rich flocked wallpaper. But Josh was bothered by constant sounds coming from above.

"That's one of Nasser's reforms, when he was in power here back in the fifties," Jim told him. "Anyone in the country can ride the trains free—on the roof."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

Jim shrugged. "Nobody seems to worry about it, and I've never heard of anyone being hurt."

The sound of footsteps overhead became louder and busier.

"They have quite a time, riding the roofs." Jim leaned out the window and looked up. Immediately there was the sound of a great many voices, all asking for *baksheesh*. He pulled quickly back inside. "They treat it like a party, Josh. People bring food and wine and . . . well, and things to smoke, and it's just a big, happy feast."

"Maybe we should be riding up there."

"Too crowded. With people who either don't like Americans or think of us as endless sources of money. Or both."

"Oh."

The train lurched forward and pulled out of the station, and almost at once the conductor appeared to punch their tickets. He regarded his American passengers with what seemed a mixture of curiosity and disapproval. Josh was looking nervous; to distract him, Jim began to point out various sights in the city, famous buildings, bridges, and other points of interest along the Nile.

When the train crossed a railroad bridge, Jim kicked into high gear. "The Nile bridges are almost as famous as the

ones across the Seine in Paris. That one there"—he pointed to one just upriver from them—"was designed by Gustav Eiffel, the engineer who built the tower. And the one we're on was built by the famous Austrian architect Hjalmar Poelzig. It's too bad you can't get a good look at it—it's a gorgeous Art Deco structure."

"You're almost as chatty as my guide yesterday."

"And you don't even have to tip me."

"I pay you enough already."

"Look at the river, Josh. Have you ever seen such an astonishing, deep blue? And the Nile's polluted now. Imagine what it must have been like before the factories were built."

"When the pyramids were new." Josh let himself turn wistful for a moment.

"They were cased in gleaming alabaster, you know. Highly polished. How they must have gleamed under the ancient sun. And they were capped with gold. The sun, reflecting from the golden capstones, must have been just dazzling. Like the eye of God. Look at the back of a dollar bill sometime. So much of the world we know has its roots in this place."

Josh was finding this uncomfortable. He wanted the dead past to be dead, and to stay that way. More and more, he was afraid it wouldn't. "We're in a different world, aren't we?"

But Jim had nodded off.

The train headed south, along the eastern shore of the Nile, and left the city behind. There was a broad band of vegetation—wild in some places, cultivated in others—along both shores of the river. Then, beyond—again on both shores—was the desert. It had a rich red-yellow color, quite remarkable to

Josh's eye. He remembered reading somewhere that the ancients had called the desert the Red Land and the fertile stretches close to the river the Black Land.

There were factories. Sugar refineries, brickmaking plants, others of a less identifiable nature. They belched smoke and fumes. At a few places, the stench was so strong it penetrated the railroad cars, and Josh had to cover his mouth and nose with a handkerchief. The smell woke Jim out of his nap.

"God, Jim, this is terrible. How can people live like this?"

"How do you think most people live?"

"Not like this. They can't." He hesitated, and he avoided looking at Jim. "Can they?"

"The world isn't all like urban America, Josh. Or *sub*urban America."

He felt like a naïve schoolboy. "No, I guess it isn't."

The farther they traveled from Cairo, the more rural the land became. Farmers plowed fields with oxen. There were canals branching off the river, for irrigation. And for sanitation—Josh saw people using them, and the river itself, as sewers.

Noticing the look on his face, Jim laughed and said, "Gosh, Toto, I don't think we're in Fox Chapel any more."

"Shut up."

He watched the passing landscape. People lived in mud-brick huts. Men and children drove donkeys. Palm trees grew in sparse clusters. And every now and then, quite unexpectedly, a ruined temple or pyramid would loom up in the distance.

Softly, Josh said, "I feel like I'm traveling back in time. This could be the Bronze Age."

But Jim had fallen asleep again. Josh closed his eyes, too. He hadn't slept well, and the gentle rocking of the train lulled

him. Before long he was asleep, and having dreams of the pyramid builders. Beautiful dreams. Except that moving through the landscape, among all the long-dead people, was the immortal Imhotep, servant of the god Anubis, the great lord of the dead.

CHAPTER 14

The Luxor train station was conveniently at the precise center of town. Jim suggested they send their luggage ahead to the hotel and walk. Josh wasn't sure he felt comfortable with the idea, but he agreed. At least, some exercise would feel good after the long train ride. They strolled along Bahr Street, enjoying the people, the atmosphere, and the wonderful view of the river.

Josh had mostly avoided the marketplaces in Cairo. They seemed too big, too noisy, too crowded, and too intimidating. Here, they were on a smaller, more human scale. He had enjoyed them on his first visit to Luxor, and he found himself enjoying them again.

Jim bought apples, grapes, and limes from a vendor. And they were delicious; Josh ate a lot.

"You'll ruin your dinner, Joshua."

"Yes, Mother."

"Don't be rude."

The Temple of Luxor loomed up ahead of them, right in the middle of the town. Obelisks soared skyward; colossi of Ramses the Great stared blindly, magnificently into eternity. Jim seemed to take a proprietary pride in it. "I hope you explored it when you were here before."

"No. It was a brief visit. And other things kept coming up."

"We'll have to do it tomorrow, then. You did see Karnak, didn't you?" He pointed behind them; in the middle distance an enormous temple loomed, larger and taller than the one they were standing in front of.

"Nope."

"Really, Josh. You're in a wonderful part of the world. You should savor every bit of it."

"I'll do my savoring once I've finished by business with Ardath Bey, okay?"

A small, lush park separated the Temple of Luxor from the Winter Palace Hotel. Flowers and flowering shrubs filled it, and people—both tourists and Egyptians—walked the pathways, smiling. Jim lingered; it was pretty obvious he wanted to walk through the park. But Josh took him impatiently by the arm. "Come on. They're only holding our reservation till six. And I want to get out to the Valley of the Nobles to check on the dig before nightfall."

The hotel was unusually crowded. Jim checked in for them; they had a suite on the top floor with, the clerk made certain to tell them, "magnificent vistas." Their luggage had already been put there "with prime Egyptian efficiency." He was playing for a large tip.

Josh decided to make him work for it. "We'll be crossing the river this evening. Would you please arrange to have a car waiting for us on the other side?"

Tight smile. "Of course, sir. And will you need a guide?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Oh—and there's a family here, the Abd-er-Rasuls. I think they're fairly prominent."

"Yes, sir. They are quite well known."

"I'd like to talk to Haroun Abd-er-Rasul. Can you get in touch with him and leave that message for me?"

"Certainly, sir."

The bellhop escorted them up to their suite—more *baksheesh*—and Jim suggested another nap before they crossed to the western side of the Nile.

"We've been sleeping on and off all day."

"Train travel exhausts me."

"You're the one who suggested it, remember?"

They changed into jeans, canvas shirts, and work boots. Jim made a comment about how badly they resembled Indiana Jones; Josh grunted and headed downstairs, with Jim following.

When they left the hotel, the sun was already low in the sky. Jim was still reluctant about their excursion, and Josh was beginning to be annoyed.

"Should you call the people at the dig and let them know we're on our way, Josh?"

"They know. I called Siemens and told him I'd be coming."

The landing for the ferry was nearly deserted. The boat itself was at the far side of the Nile; there would be a few minutes' wait. Some Italian tourists bickered among themselves. A couple of Egyptian kids approached Josh and asked for money. He gave them each an Egyptian pound.

"You're getting generous in your old age."

"Rockefeller used to give dimes to poor kids."

"You're no Rockefeller, Joshua. Look, I really need to get some more sleep. Would you mind if I skip this outing?"

"I need company, Jim." He added softly, "Please."

Jim frowned and didn't say much more.

Finally the ferry docked. They stepped aboard, among a small handful of other passengers. The boat lurched and headed across the river. Even though there was no wind, the water was rough and the current swift; Josh had to hold the rail to steady himself. When, ten minutes later, they put in at the opposite bank, he was feeling mildly seasick.

Their car was waiting, a Land Rover. The Egyptian who'd brought it smiled a too-ingratiating smile and asked how long they'd be gone.

"We shouldn't be too late."

Jim added hopefully, "I'm praying."

Josh paid the man and took his seat at the wheel. "Get in."

"Are you sure you know the way?"

"Will you please get in, James? I'm feeling edgy enough."

They headed west, toward the Theban Hills. The roads were nearly deserted. Here and there they passed another vehicle. Now and then they saw an Egyptian on foot or riding a donkey. But not even they dispelled the eerie stillness of the landscape.

Despite his confidence, Josh wasn't quite certain of the correct route. Before too long, they were lost. They passed the Colossi of Memnon, the gigantic statues of Ramses the Great, and Josh realized he'd taken the wrong road.

They passed the ruined temple called the Ramesseum, the funeral temple of Ramses III. An enormous head of the pharaoh lay on the ground, its sightless eyes wide open; of its body, there was no sign. Jim couldn't resist pointing out that it was famous, the place that inspired Shelley to write "Ozymandias." "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair," he recited.

"I know all about that. And despair is exactly what I'm starting to feel. Where the hell is the road to the Valley of the Queens?"

Finally, he stopped and asked a man driving a donkey cart, who pointed out the correct road to him. He gave the man *baksheesh*, and they were, at last, headed in the right direction.

When they reached the entrance to the valley, Josh recognized it at once. "Yes, this is it. Thank God."

"Thank that guy with the donkey."

"Be quiet."

He parked the Land Rover and they walked along the main path. The tombs of long-dead queens and princes gaped, their interiors black as night. Josh tried to ignore them and focus on finding the right path up the hill.

"These people," Jim mused, "always had death on their minds."

"Doesn't everyone?"

"No. There's life. There's love."

"I'm sure they found time for love, too. Their civilization lasted three thousand years. Here's the path. Are you ready for a climb?"

They headed up. Josh scanned the surrounding hills, half expecting to see jackals. It was much later than he'd planned on getting there, and the sky was beginning to darken. A bright star shone through the twilight. Gravel crunched under their boots. Jim became winded faster than Josh would have thought.

Then they topped the hill. In the far west, the sun was just notching the horizon, a deep red-orange. Its glow colored the landscape. Josh looked back over his shoulder, and the full moon was just climbing over the eastern horizon. It seemed enormous, its face the palest white imaginable.

"This," Jim said, "would be the perfect time for the jackals to start howling in the distant hills."

"Be quiet, will you?"

Josh looked down the path at the dig site. Everything there was still, unnaturally so. And in the dusk, it seemed to him there was that same green mist, fainter than he'd seen it before, but definite. It swirled among the tents; it obscured the entrance to the princess' tomb.

"Oh my God. Something's happened."

"Josh, will you get a grip on yourself? Just because there's some fog—"

"Fog? On the edge of the Sahara? Besides, have you ever seen fog that was green before?"

"That's just a trick of the light."

"I've seen it before, Jim."

Jim looked skeptical.

"I have. I mean it. And it isn't good." He stepped off down the path to the dig.

"Josh." Jim caught him by the shoulder. "You're losing it. Will you please try and calm down?"

"I know what I'm talking about."

"No, you don't. You're letting this business with Ardath Bey make you crazy. Get hold of yourself."

Josh's cell phone rang. It was his mother. He snapped the phone open. "What?"

"Really, Joshua. I *am* your mother."

"What do you want?"

"The doctor has just been with Stephanie. He says the earlier diagnosis was wrong."

"She's not pregnant? Thank heaven."

"No, that's not it. She's farther along than they thought. Eight months. You'll be an uncle before much longer." Her voice dripped with sarcasm. Before Josh could respond, she hung up.

"What is it, Josh?"

He told him. "There are times I'd like to kill my mother."

"Buy a ticket and get in line."

"Come on, Jim. Let's get down there."

They descended silently; the sound of their footsteps was the only noise; otherwise, everything was completely still. A gentle evening breeze blew up and began to dispel the mist.

Halfway down, Josh found himself too anxious to contain. "Where is everyone? Why aren't we seeing them? Why aren't we hearing them? I can't even hear the sound of their generator."

Jim kept walking, without answering him.

Below them, the last of the mist dissipated. There were no lights in the camp. The last rays of the sun died; from behind them, moonglow splashed over the hilltop and spread over the landscape.

At the foot of the hill, at the edge of the camp, Josh stopped. There was still no one in sight.

"What are you waiting for?"

There was tension in his voice as he said, "I know what we'll find."

"Come on, Josh. They're all at dinner or something, that's all."

Jim led the way.

And in only a moment it became clear that everyone in the camp was dead. Jim rushed from one tent to the next, to the next. Their throats were torn open. One boy's head was completely severed; a few others were nearly so. Blood soaked nearly everything. Siemens himself was just outside the entrance to the tomb; he was torn to pieces.

Josh stood over his body, numb, not knowing what to feel. Everywhere he turned, there was death. An image of the god Anubis, jackal-headed, laughing at him, came into his head.

From inside the tomb there came a sound, not much more than a whisper. Josh looked in. Everything inside was in complete blackness. But there were soft whimpers, the tiniest sounds imaginable.

He switched on his flashlight and stepped inside. "Who's there?"

There was no answer. But someone was there; he had heard. Someone had escaped the carnage outside, had hidden here for shelter.

"Hello?" He swept the tomb with the beam of his light.

And there she was: a mother jackal who had just given birth. A litter of seven—no, eight—pups suckled greedily at her teats. She raised her head to stare at Josh, and her eyes glowed. For a moment, she seemed not to know what to make of him. Then she lowered her head, just slightly, bared her teeth and let out a low growl. Josh moved slowly backward to the entrance, then stepped outside.

"Jim?"

There was no sign of him. Then his voice came, from the most distant part of the camp. "I'm here, Josh."

In the farthest tent, Jim had found one girl who was still alive. Her throat was ripped like the others, and she was gasping for breath. He cradled her head in his arm.

"What happened?" he asked softly "Who did this?"

Her mouth formed the word *Imhotep*. But she was too weak to give it voice.

"Josh!" he called. "Get over here."

But by the time Josh reached them, the girl was dead. She was the last. There was no one left alive.

When the completeness of the massacre became inescapably clear, Josh moved to the dead center of the site, not moving, not talking. A tear came to his eye, and he wiped it away before Jim could see. "I did this. *We* did this, somehow."

"We?" Jim followed him, looking around, shaking his head at the terrible sight.

"Our family. Somehow, we—this is—"

"Don't be foolish. A pack of jackals—"

"Jackals would have eaten them, not just—just—killed them and left. Besides, do you see any jackals? The only one around just gave birth. She couldn't have—"

"Maybe they ran away when they heard us coming?"

"Why would we frighten them when no one in the camp did?"

The full moon had cleared the hills and was well up into the sky. Josh looked upward, into its face. "There's a jackal in the tomb. A female. With eight newborn pups."

He got out his phone and, not knowing the number of the local police, called the hotel. He explained briefly what had happened and instructed the clerk to have the police come as quickly as possible.

He turned to Jim. "They want to know, how many dead?"

"I didn't count, Josh."

"Neither did I." Into the phone he said, "Fifteen, maybe eighteen, I'm not sure. Just send the police, all right? Quickly."

When he ended the call, he and Jim looked at each other wordlessly.

Then Josh started the electric generator and went around the camp, turning on the lights one by one.

"Should you be doing that? I mean, there might be evidence or something . . ."

"Do you want us to wait here in the dark?"

"Point taken."

The generator started, then failed; the lights dimmed and went out again. Josh restarted it; it sputtered but kept running this time.

Half an hour later, there was no sign of the police, and Josh was more and more on edge. The air was beginning to have a chilly tang. The two of them sat at one of the folding tables, trying to make small talk, trying not to let all the death around them frighten them any more than it had. The few lights they'd turned on were attracting night insects.

There were charts and drawings covering most of the table. Jim thumbed through them. Most were line drawings of gods, goddesses, demons, monsters, all surrounded by hieroglyphs. "Do you have any idea what this stuff is?"

"Probably sketches of the reliefs on the walls of the tomb. I think they copy them as soon as they can. So there's a record, in case—in case—"

"Yes," Jim said sadly, "in case." He swatted at a moth.

"Where are the damned police?"

"They'll be here, Josh. This can't be on their usual beat, after all."

"I told them what happened. They should be here." He got up and began pacing.

"Will you calm down?"

"You told me that before we found all this, remember? I was letting my imagination run away with me."

"Going off the deep end isn't going to help things, Josh. Just try and stay cool."

"Can't you see? Have you forgotten about all these people? God!"

"No, I haven't forgotten. But getting worked up won't help them—or us."

"Where are the damned police, that's all I asked."

From the corner of his eye, Josh caught a bit of movement. It startled him, and he looked around the camp warily. The same green mist was beginning to appear; streamers of it snaked their way through the night air, and they seemed be to getting thicker and more numerous as he watched.

"Jim, let's go."

"The police will be here, damn it."

"Not in time. Jim, I'm telling you we have to get out. We're trapped in this valley." He stared at him pointedly. "Exactly like all these others."

"Stop it."

Josh moved to the nearest tent. A young archaeology student lay on the ground, eyes and mouth gaping in fear, throat ripped horribly open, blood covering most of his body. Then, as Josh watched, the young man's right eye fluttered.

Was he alive? Had he, somehow, improbably, survived? Josh got down on a knee beside him. "Can you hear me? Are you okay?"

The boy blinked three times. Then he was still again.

Josh touched his cheek. "Can you hear me?"

Again the boy's eyes moved. They stared at Josh but did not seem to be seeing him. The fingers of his left hand flexed, then relaxed. Green mist began to fill the tent.

Josh jumped to his feet. "Jim, we have to get out of here. If we don't, we'll be next."

He ran out of the tent, to where Jim was still sitting at the camp table, and caught him by his collar. "Come on!"

Jim pulled free of him. "For heaven's sake, Josh, will you get a fucking grip?"

"We have to go." He tried pulling Jim to his feet, but Jim resisted.

From the door of the tomb came the sound of that jackal howling. And there was movement, faint but clearly visible, in more and more of the tents. And the streamers of mist were everywhere, getting thicker.

"Please, Jim." He tugged frantically at Jim's shirt. "You don't know what's happening here."

There was the sound of distant movement. Jim removed Josh's hands from his shirt and pointed up the path on the hill. "Yes, I do. The police are here."

Josh looked up the hill. There was a line of four flashlights. The officers were descending the path more quickly than seemed quite safe in the near darkness. And at once, all the movement in the camp stopped; everything was still again.

"Now stop acting like a frightened idiot, will you? We are Brandt Industries, remember? We have to put up a good front for the locals."

Josh forced himself to calm down, or rather to hid his panic.

After another few moments, the police officers arrived. They were smiling; when they saw the carnage, they stopped.

The officer who seemed to be in charge, a sergeant, approached him. "You are Mr. Brandt?"

Josh nodded. "And this is Mr. James Huntingdon." Weakly he added, "He is in charge of Brandt Industries' Middle Eastern Operations."

"I see." He seemed, quite pointedly, unimpressed. "Do you have any idea what happened here?"

"No." He couldn't look the man in the eye. "We came here to visit the dig, and—"

"How many are there?"

"I don't know. It didn't occur to me to count."

The sergeant nodded to his men, and they spread out and did a body count. Seventeen people were dead. The police

took statements from Jim and Josh, then suggested they return to their hotel. "Please let us know before you leave Luxor, gentlemen. We will almost certainly want to talk to you again."

They promised to do so. Jim headed for the foot of the path; Josh lingered for a moment, took another long look around, then followed him.

Softly, Josh asked, "You saw all the bodies. You saw the death. Do you still think I'm letting my imagination run away with me?"

"I've never seen anything like that before. I don't—I don't think I know what to feel. But—but—I do know that panic won't help anything."

The full moon had climbed high into the sky by the time they reached their Land Rover. The landscape was bleached pale gray by it. Once again, Josh felt tears coming. "Look around us. This isn't the world anymore, Jim, it's the ghost of a world."

Jim didn't answer him.

"We killed them, Jim. They died because of us."

"Don't be foolish."

"Mother says they misdiagnosed. Steph's eight months gone."

"God."

"No god here is likely to help us."

"Stop it."

It took a long time for the night ferry to reach the western shore. The two of them waited on the dock, not saying much. There were no other passengers.

When, at long last, they got back to the hotel, the night clerk asked them about what had happened. "When you called, sir, and there was that horrible tone in your voice, I—"

"Not now." Josh would have given anything not to have the subject brought up again.

"But sir, all those people—"

"Look, it's been a long, exhausting night. Could we just have the key to our suite, please?"

He handed it to them and watched them get into the elevator. These Americans, so excitable.

Then he remembered there was a note for Josh, from Haroun Abd-er-Rasul. Oh well, it would wait till morning.

It was Luke Joshua D'Acteo's twenty-first birthday, and he was going to get as completely, obliviously drunk as he could. Isn't that what everybody does?

And drunk he was. And he'd had a good dose of crystal meth on top of the booze; there was always crystal at the Horsefly. It was nearly closing time, and most of the crowd had left already. But Luke didn't want to get just stoned; he was determined to get laid. The good ones were gone, mostly, but there were a few guys left he wouldn't be too embarrassed to be seen leaving with.

The D'Acteos had moved to Erie thirty years earlier, to manage Brandt Industries' specialty steel plant there. When the bottom had fallen out of the American steel industry, back in the eighties, the plant had closed, but the family stayed in Erie, living on their accumulated wealth and enjoying their status as the biggest fish in that small pond. They all drank.

Luke had first tasted liquor at a family Christmas in Pittsburgh, when Aunt Claudia had gotten him drunk on whiskey sours and tried to seduce him. Since then, his life had been a kind of party unusual in a depressed town like Erie.

The staff at the Horsefly all knew him, or rather knew his money, and they were used to seeing him leave wasted. He tended to be arrogant and even nasty, in the way of rich boys. But he *was* rich, and that mattered. For years they had pretended

not to notice his fake ID. And tonight, he had made a big noise about becoming a legal adult.

Luke wasn't bad looking, and he had more money than any of the other regulars, but he had never had a real boyfriend, and it bothered him. He tried to be like everyone else. When some of the trendier guys started shaving their arms, he shaved his. When the opinion went around that guys look dorky in glasses, he got contacts. When some of the best dancers got haircuts that made them look like Moe the Stooge, Luke got one too. But even though he was usually able to find a guy for the night, he had not had a relationship. Which made him drink and drug all the more.

There was a guy in the corner, blond, trim, haircut that made him look like a hedgehog but not too bad looking. Luke decided he'd do.

"Hi. I'm Luke."

"Tim." The guy was even more wasted than Luke.

They made pointed eye contact, and each knew he'd scored for the night. Leaning on one another for support, they left the Horsefly together and lurched down the street, singing "Like a Virgin" and laughing in that way peculiar to drunken kids who think they're sophisticated adults.

It had been raining, and the streets were wet. Water trickled along the gutters. Three blocks from the bar, Tim stumbled and fell. The back of his head struck the edge of the curb. He had a violent seizure. Then his limbs went slack, and he was still.

Luke, stupid with drink, watched. Tim's body went completely limp. The spark went out of his eyes and they turned inert.

Despite what he saw, Josh asked, "Are you okay?"

Tim, who was dead, did not answer him.

"Hey, I asked if you're okay." He got down on his knees. When he realized he'd gotten his slacks wet he muttered,

"Shit." Then he touched—what was his name again?—touched his face. "Wake up."

Tim stayed silent.

"You're really hot. I want to . . . you know."

Tim, who was no longer very hot, kept quiet.

So Luke bent down and kissed him.

From the sewer near them floated a puff of green mist.

And Tim, dead Tim, kissed back, hard. He bit off Luke's tongue.

Luke screamed and tried to pull away, but Tim had a ferocious grip on him. He sank his teeth into Luke's cheek, then into his chin. He chewed frantically. And Luke's screams echoed through the deserted streets.

Before long, most of Luke's face was gone. The alcohol and drugs dulled the pain, but he still felt it. Blood flowed down the front of his best cruising clothes. When he'd lost enough of it, he collapsed, touchingly, into Tim's arms.

The next morning, a bartender, on his way home from a long night of partying with the other staff at the Horsefly, found them there on the street: two young men, arms around each other, one of them not immediately identifiable—his face had been chewed off completely and he had bled to death. But he had seen Luke and Tim leave the bar together, and he figured the faceless one must be Luke.

He shrugged and walked away. Somebody else would find them soon enough and call the police; there was no reason for him to get involved. Besides, the irony of it struck him as terribly funny. Nasty little Luke D'Acteo was always stoned; now he was stone dead. But at least it looked like he had finally found himself a lover.

CHAPTER 15

The Abd-er-Rasuls lived in the largest private house in Luxor, larger even than the mayor's residence; Haroun told Josh about it with obvious pride as they walked there from the Winter Palace.

Jim had stayed behind at the hotel. There were a few business emergencies he had to tend to, a drilling contract in Dubai, an export license in Yemen. These things always came up in his job, and they had to be taken care of. Still, he was concerned about Josh.

"Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"From everything I've heard, they're a family of thieves, not mad killers."

"Well, you've got my number programmed into your speed dial, right? You call me the minute anything odd happens."

"I'm having lunch with tomb robbers." Josh grinned at him. "What's unusual about that?"

"So you're really over being worried about all this . . . all this nonsense?"

Abruptly Josh turned serious. "You saw what happened to the dig crew. Whatever this is, Jim, it isn't nonsense."

"Then . . . ?"

"Ahmed Abd-er-Rasul was the foreman on my father's excavation. He knows what happened there, if anyone does. I have to find out."

"You call me the minute anything unpleasant happens, okay?"

"What could be unpleasant, Jim?" He smiled at him again. "I love Middle Eastern food."

Haroun Abd-er-Rasul was waiting for him in the lobby at exactly noon. Josh barely remembered him from their earlier meeting. They exchanged pleasantries for a moment, then Josh said that he hoped Haroun's grandfather was well.

"He is ninety-seven years old, Mr. Brandt. How well could he be?"

"Please, call me Josh. He's alive, Haroun." He did not add, that's more than a lot of my family is, now.

"He has been most anxious to talk with you. And he has asked me to give you his condolences for what happened to your crew last night." He smiled to show he was serious. "In addition to which, I hope, you will accept my own."

"Thank you very much."

"Did you know them well?"

"Not really, no. But they were my . . . my . . . *employees* would not exactly be the word, but . . ."

"Just so, Mr. Brandt."

"Josh, please."

"Josh. Have the police determined what, or who—"

"So far, no. They are investigating."

They stepped out of the hotel onto the boulevard. The Nile was shimmering in the noonday sunlight. "Do you have any idea what your grandfather wants to tell me?"

He shrugged. "Our family is privy to many secrets. I daresay he wants to share one or two of them with you." And again he smiled. "He is old, and old secrets are always the most intriguing."

Josh had the faint suspicion he was begin teased, or maybe tested.

They walked south along the river. Egyptians in flowing galabias walked by alone, by twos, by threes, chatting volubly. Busloads of tourists disgorged in front of the hotels. Boys selling recently manufactured "antiquities" harangued them, hoping for lucrative sales, especially to foreigners who didn't

have a clue how to haggle properly. In side streets, produce vendors worked in little stalls, and the aroma of their wares filled the air, fresh fruit, roasted meat . . .

Behind Josh and Haroun the Luxor Temple rose up, its soaring obelisks the tallest things in view. Across the Nile was the western plain, dotted with the funerary temples and colossi of ancient rulers. Beyond them were the Theban Hills, where the bodies and the treasures of generations of pharaohs might still lie hidden, for all anyone knew. Josh hadn't bothered, before, to notice how beautiful it all was. And how exciting.

"You know our family's history?" Haroun was in a voluble mood.

"Some of it, yes."

"For three hundred years we were the most skillful, most successful tomb robbers in Egypt." He said it with obvious pride. "Many of the old tombs were robbed in ancient times, you understand. There was not a great deal for the archaeologists to discover, not even back in the time when Napoleon led the 'rediscovery' of our land. I like to think the ancient tomb thieves were ancestors of ours."

Josh wondered if this was really something the Abd-er-Rasuls should be proud of, but he kept tactfully silent about it.

But Haroun seemed to read his mind. "You are wondering why such a legacy fills me with pride, are you not?"

"Not really. I—"

"Skill and wealth are not commodities to be sneered at, Mr. Brandt."

"Josh."

"Our family is more skillful and wealthier than any in Egypt, except the oil barons. But you understand that. I have read enough about American corporations to know how Brandt Industries grew."

It was an uncomfortable subject, too close to the bone for Josh's taste. If Haroun was trying to create a bond between them, this wasn't the way to do it. Then it occurred to Josh that perhaps he was trying to do the exact reverse of that. The suggestion that there might be some equivalency between grave robbing and American business left him more than slightly on edge.

"You have been to the museum in Cairo, Mr. Brandt?"

"Josh. Yes, of course."

"And seen the royal mummies?"

"Naturally."

He made a dramatic little pause. "Our family found them. Well, most of them, at any rate. You know the story?"

Josh said that he didn't.

"They were taken from their tombs in the Valley of the Kings, for protection, in ancient times—hidden in a cave deep in the bowels of the Theban Hills. Scores of them, kings, queens, royal children. Moved there by their followers, to preserve their bodies from desecration by the thieves who would, sooner or later, have broken into their tombs." He smiled. "Us."

"Does anyone know who moved them?"

"The priests of Anubis, most probably." He shrugged. They were near a fruit stand. "Would you like an apple? Azi, here, always has the most succulent ones."

"No, thank you."

They walked, and Haroun went on with his story.

"My great-great-great-grandfather, looking for ancient treasure, found them. It was quite perilous. The entrance to the cave was halfway up a sheer cliff face. But the peril was worth it. Inside he found scores of royal mummies. And on their dead, desiccated royal persons was gold.

"Gold, Mr. Brandt. Our family kept the trove secret, and for decades we prospered. Some of the treasure we kept; other parts we sold on the black market to western collectors.

"Then finally, after generations, the Antiquities Service found us out." He beamed with family pride. "And that is how our royal mummies made their way to glass cases in Cairo."

Josh had listened, fascinated. He was tempted to ask whether despoiling the dead wasn't a sacrilege, but it seemed wiser not to raise the question.

But again, Haroun seemed to read his mind. "The gold was there, buried in the earth. Sooner or later, someone would have found it and taken it. Most likely, archaeologists, as western countries call their tomb robbers." He caught Josh's arm, and they stopped walking. "Is it not better that the wealth remain in Egypt?"

"I . . . I suppose so. I can't say I've ever thought about it."

"Precisely, Mr. Brandt. But here we are."

It was an odd-looking place, part Victorian, more or less, and part Middle Eastern in an off-center way. Spires and gingerbread were covered with stucco. There was a minaret in the Muslim style. Stained-glass windows were covered with elaborate wooden screens, carved in intricate geometric patterns, again in the Islamic style. The house that grave-robbing built.

When a servant opened the door and they stepped inside, Josh smelled incense; he wasn't certain of the precise scent. A second servant was waiting with cups of mint tea. Haroun ushered him into a parlor appointed with rich, plush furniture, and they sat on low, cushioned divans and talked more.

To Josh's relief, there was no more discussion of stealing from the dead. Haroun was content with small talk and gossip. Jim had warned Josh to expect this leisurely pace; to try and rush things would be rude, and the Abd-er-Rasuls would likely make some excuse and give him the bum's rush. "Things in the Middle East move at a different pace than what you're used to. Be patient, be polite, and they'll get to the point."

Another servant brought little pastries covered with honey. They were cloyingly sweet, but Josh ate three of them and complimented the baker.

"My daughter," Haroun told him smugly.

Finally, after nearly forty minutes, still another servant appeared and whispered something in Haroun's ear.

"My grandfather has wakened from his noonday sleep, Mr. Brandt. He is asking for you."

Josh complimented the hospitality still again and got to his feet. All the chat had seemed a waste of time to him, but if it would lead to him learn something definite, it was worth it.

Haroun and the servant led him to the rear part of the ground floor, through a maze of rooms, all of them richly decorated in the Muslim manner Josh was finding more and more appealing. All but one, that is—in one room, well off to the side of the hallway, two boys in their early teens sat on the floor in front of a large-screen television, playing video games. Haroun smiled at them, then at Josh. "My sons." He seemed, for once, not to want to expand on a subject, and they kept walking.

The air in this part of the house was scented with something different, a sweet, pungent, spicy smell. Josh asked what it was.

"Cardamom, Mr. Brandt. Our ancestors used it in their cooking. Then, somehow, the habit of using it migrated to Scandinavia. History always takes such interesting twists. It is my grandfather's favorite spice."

They had reached the rear of the house. It hadn't dawned on Josh immediately, but it was almost as big as his own home, back in Pittsburgh. Haroun knocked softly at a heavy wooden door—again carved with those geometric designs—opened it, and gestured for Josh to follow him inside.

The room was dark; the window screens were thicker, heavier than elsewhere in the house. The air was thick with the aroma of cardamom, burning in a censer in one corner. In

the other three corners, oil lamps burned; a servant stood at attention beside one of them. There was one overstuffed chair, and the room was scattered about with large cushions in a riot of colors and patterns. In another corner, a boy sat, playing soft music on a stringed instrument Josh didn't recognize.

On an enormous bed lay the oldest man Josh had ever seen. Almost completely bald, wrinkled, and not moving at all, he might almost have been another of those royal mummies. Eyes black as a bird's watched them as they entered.

"Mr. Joshua Brandt," Haroun said solemnly, "may I have the honor of presenting Ahmed Abd-er-Rasul, my grandfather and the patriarch of our family."

Not certain of the etiquette, Josh made a slight bow and said, "It is a privilege, sir."

Ahmed ignored him and instead raised a finger and pointed it at Haroun. "Get out of here, boy." Haroun was fifty years old if he was a day. Without a word, he turned and left.

The old man laughed. His movements were slow; his age showed in them. "Pull up a cushion, Mr. Brandt, and be comfortable. My grandson is a fool."

Josh took the largest of the cushions and arranged it beside the bed. Sitting on it, he had to look up at Ahmed. Was that intentional, he wondered? An Egyptian variety of one-upmanship? Then he found himself wondering whether Ahmed's movements were merely slow, or whether they were deliberate—carefully calculated for effect.

Ahmed smiled "Are you a fool, too, Mr. Brandt?"

Rude question. But he had no choice but to play along. "My mother would tell you so."

"Women." Josh couldn't tell if the tone in his voice suggested contempt or affection.

Not knowing what else to say, and knowing how feeble it sounded, he repeated, "Yes, women."

"When you were a boy, your mother was quite full of herself, as I recall it."

"These days, she's full of something else, too."

Ahmed's eyes narrowed. "I am ninety-seven years old, Mr. Brandt."

"Can I persuade you to call me by my first name? Your grandson seems unwilling, but I—"

"Such familiarity would not be proper. But if you wish it . . ."

"I'd feel more comfortable."

"Ah, you presume upon a host's duty." So far, Ahmed had not moved, except his eyes and his right arm. Now he turned his head slightly to face Josh. "Your father was an even bigger fool. Did you know that?"

"No. I—I mean—I don't really remember much of him."

"You were a sweet-natured boy, the only one in a monstrous family."

So much, Josh thought, for the obligations of a polite host. "I'm afraid I don't remember much at all from that time."

"You are fortunate. Your sister—surely she remembers?"

It threw him off-balance. "My sister—she—she is not well."

"Just so. I warned him. Your father, that is. I told him that the resting place of an immortal was nothing to disturb. And the papyrus he was determined to find, the *Book of Anubis*—I explained to him every way I could that the powers of the Lord of the Dead were not to be meddled with." Very faintly, he chuckled. "Your father was every inch the American."

Ahmed's insults were getting more and more pointed. This was not what Josh had expected, and not at all what he was used to. He forced himself to keep silent and let the old man go on.

"Your sister." Ahmed raised his head and looked pointedly at Josh. He did it quickly, and this sudden animation startled his visitor, as it was intended to do.

"Sisters," Josh corrected him. "The older of them died recently."

"There were only the two of you when your family visited Luxor. You and the little girl."

"Our older sister, Louise, was in boarding school then."

"Boarding school. How affluent."

Josh decided he had had enough of this. "Your family isn't exactly living in poverty, Mr. Abd-er-Rasul."

"Indeed not. Our fortune was made on the folly of westerners. Do you have any idea how much American millionaires used to pay us for contraband mummies? Mummies we had already stripped and robbed, then rewrapped?"

"Dishonesty of that kind hardly seems something to boast about."

"To separate a fool from his wealth—is that dishonesty, exactly? Your surviving sister is not well. She is ill in her soul."

"How can you know that?"

"Because, Mr. Brandt, I was there when your father caused the sarcophagus of Imhotep to be opened. He, I, and your sister. We were alone in the tomb. And I know that Imhotep possessed the *Book of Anubis*."

Josh narrowed his eyes. "I'm afraid I don't follow that."

"Of course not. But your father is dead, at the hand of Imhotep. I am alive and well, or as well as my age permits. That means that the ancient spells must have worked upon your sister." He shifted his weight in the bed and rolled onto his right side. "It is as uncomplicated as that. May I offer you mint tea?" He gestured to the waiting servant.

But Josh told him he had had tea with Haroun and didn't want more. "What I do want, Mr. Abd-er-Rasul, is to know precisely what you're trying to tell me."

"Ah. Just so. I wonder if I really should explain it all." He laid his head back and closed his eyes. "It was a generation ago, and you are hardly likely to believe, or even to understand."

"Try me." Josh made his voice hard, like an unhappy CEO, then realized that might be a mistake. "Please, sir."

"Americans are fools."

"You are repeating yourself."

"Am I, indeed." It was a statement, not a question.

Ahmed clapped his hands, and without a word the servant and the boy musician left the room, closing the door quietly behind them. Then, with considerable difficulty, the old man sat up.

Josh arranged pillows behind him, apparently to his satisfaction. It was the first time they had been so close; their faces were no more than a foot apart. Ahmed's was wrinkled much more severely than Josh had realized before. The man was almost a century old, and it showed. But his eyes were the brightest black. He smiled at Josh, and his teeth showed.

The proximity made Josh uncomfortable. He made one final gesture to arrange Ahmed's pillows, then moved quickly back to his own cushion on the floor.

"No!" Ahmed said it forcefully, and it was rather startling. "Sit here beside me on my bed. Hold my hand while I talk."

Uncertainly, Josh got up again and moved to the bed. Ahmed's hand felt like sandpaper; Josh wasn't certain whether it was the feel of it or the unaccustomed intimacy with a strange old man that was making him nervous. But he needed to hear what Ahmed had to say; and so he forced himself not to let his discomfort show.

"Please, sir, tell me. I want to hear."

"First—" A quick, sly smile spread across his face. "That cabinet there." He pointed to a heavy wooden chest of drawers against the far wall. "Open the bottom drawer."

Puzzled, Josh crossed the room and opened it.

"In the back, under a red silk dressing gown, you will find a bottle of Chianti."

"Wine, sir?"

"Wine. Yes. You have grasped it."

Josh groped in the drawer, found the bottle, and pulled it out. "But I thought—"

"You thought we Muslims were forbidden wine. And so we are. Bring it here. In the other corner of that drawer you will find a corkscrew and glasses for us."

Josh got them and brought everything to Ahmed.

"I am an old, old man, Mr. Brandt. And I have been a good and faithful servant to the Lord. He will not begrudge me this one little vice." He smiled. "Will he?"

"I'm no theologian, sir."

"No, of course you are not. That is a good part of why you are so confused about recent events." He worked the cork out of the bottle and filled the glasses. Josh's, he filled halfway; his own, almost to the rim.

Josh took the glass and resumed his seat. "I'm afraid I don't see what theology has to do with anything."

"Of course not. But look out the window, there, Mr. Brandt. Out across the Nile to the Theban Hills. Gods and god-men are buried there, dead but still with us. Gods never die. Belief in them never dies, though it may perhaps fall asleep. They are always with us, part of the landscape, part of what makes the world as it is."

Josh started to stand up, to go to the window, then caught himself. "You know perfectly well that we're at the back of the house, and this window faces the wrong direction."

Ahmed laughed. "Even so. Do you take my point?"

"I—I suppose so." He wasn't at all certain that he did. He arranged himself comfortably on his cushion. "Now if we're finished with theology, would you please tell me the thing I want to know?"

"The thing you want to know." Ahmed said it softly, swirled his wine gently, sipped it, and glanced at Josh from the corner of his eye. "Yes. Of course. Let me tell you."

"I was the crew foreman for your father," Ahmed related. "You know that very well. But you see, I was the most skilled, the most experienced man for the job. I knew more about the Egyptian past than most archaeologists. I had memorized every tomb and temple, and I read hieroglyphics quite fluently. I could do a great deal more on a dig than merely supervise the workers.

"Your father's archaeologist was a Canadian named Richard Larson. Neither of them would listen to me when I warned them that they were digging in a dangerous place, a place haunted by the spirit of the god. Larson, in particular, was a colossal fool. I showed him scroll after scroll, inscription after inscription, to try and make him understand what he was doing. All to no avail.

"When, after weeks of digging, we finally located the tomb of the architect-god Imhotep, servant of the god Anubis, their excitement could not be contained. Protocol required that they notify the Antiquities Service of the find, and Larson took the next train to Cairo, for that purpose.

"Larson had found the tomb entrance himself. For security's sake, the dig crew was sent home. There were no guards on duty—it was hoped that keeping a low profile would keep news of the discovery from leaking out prematurely. I was there, and your father, and no one else.

"After a time he went back across the river, to the Winter Palace, for dinner with the family, and to tell his wife, your mother, as quietly as possible that the excavation had been a success. He told her he was going back, to spend the night at what he pridefully called *his* tomb, and he wanted the rest of you to come and see.

"As he told it to me later, your mother, being your mother, made a show of being unimpressed. She feigned a headache and refused to cross the Nile to the dig site. You, also, were not feeling well. Whether that was genuine or another invention of your mother's, I do not know. But your sister was excited, quite eager to see what her father had found.

"So after dark, by the light of an enormous full moon, your father and she crossed the Nile again, secretly, away from human notice. The tomb was not in any of the usual valleys, you understand. It was at the far side of the Theban Hills, where the Great Desert begins. Other tombs have been found there, occasionally, in little gorges and small valleys cut by the only by camel or horseback. Your father hired camels, and the waters of flash floods. The place was not accessible by motorcar, two of them headed back to that desolate, isolated place. To 'his' tomb.

"I had waited patiently for his return. And when I saw he had brought the little girl, I was alarmed. I tried still again to warn him about what he was meddling in, but it was no use.

"No one but Larson, your father, and myself knew that the tomb had been uncovered. There was no one to see. Against my urgent pleas, by torchlight, he forced his way through the entrance and into the tomb.

"It was intact. No tomb robbers had ever plundered it, because none would have dared. The funerary furnishings were all there, golden, bejeweled, inlaid with ivory and ebony . . . Your father set up a folding table and set lanterns about the interior.

"The sarcophagus of Imhotep was made of solid gold, like Tutankhamen's. Inside it was nested a wooden coffin. We removed it and propped it against a wall of the tomb. Then slowly, carefully, he pried open the lid, exposing Imhotep's mummified remains, wrapped tightly in the frayed, yellowed linen. And there in the coffin, resting beside his body, was the prize your

father had sought so eagerly, the *Book of Anubis*. The flickering light from the lanterns seemed to bring a kind of animation to the features of the mummy.

"'You can read this, Ahmed?' he asked me. He fingered the scroll almost lovingly.

"I assured him that I could, and he instructed me to make an English translation, and to set it down side by side with a phonetic transcription of the Egyptian words. He wanted to know what it would have sounded like as Imhotep himself would have spoken it.

"'But, sir,' I pleaded, 'this book is dangerous. The spells it contains—'

"He cut me off. And he called me a superstitious fool. Glumly, not wanting to lose my salary, I sat at the table and began to do as he asked. One by one, I noted the sounds of the hieroglyphs and their English meaning.

"But the mummy—it was like none I had ever seen. The bandages were as old as time, gray and frayed with the ages. But—but the mummy had not been embalmed, simply wrapped. As if it was asleep. As if whoever had prepared it expected it to waken again.

"I began to explain this to your father, but he was impatient with me. 'What are you trying to say, Ahmed? Are you trying to frighten me?'

"Then, outside the tomb, we heard the howling of a pack of jackals. I knew—*understood*—what your father did not or could not, they had come to the tomb to do homage to the demigod whose flesh was interred there. Stephanie was alarmed, understandably so. Your father got his rifle and fired several shots into the air, and the jackals scattered.

"Bur Stephanie was terrified by them. Your father and I did our best to reassure her they were gone, but she begged your father to go after them with his gun and exterminate them. It

seemed pointless to me, not to say unwise—Imhotep had been devoted to the service of the jackal-headed god. And we had committed sacrilege enough already. But she would not be quieted, and finally, reluctantly, your father took his gun and went outside.

"We heard his footsteps retreat into the moonlit night. After a few minutes, we heard shots. And the sound seemed to reassure her in a way that our words had not. She relaxed and began moving about the tomb, examining everything.

"She had a thousand questions, as any child might in a situation like that. I explained the carvings on the tomb walls for her, depictions of the death and resurrection of Osiris. And of course I kept working on my translation of that awful text.

"As I was doing so, a bat flew into the tomb, a huge black thing. They often use old abandoned tombs for their nests. It swooped and dove at us until finally I managed to strike it with a shovel and kill it.

"I took its body outside, to dispose of it. In the distance I heard your father, calling softly. 'Ahmed, help! Help me!' There was pain in his voice. No—more than pain, agony.

"Concerned, I followed the sound of it. Fifty yards away, behind a group of large rocks, I found him. The jackals had reassembled, and they had somehow managed to bring him down. They were tearing at his flesh, devouring him while he was still alive. His blood glistened in the moonlight and soaked the desert sand. I shouted and waved my arms to try and frighten them away, but they stood their ground. After a moment I was able to reach his rifle, where he had dropped it, and to fire several shots. The animals ran off again, into the hills. One of them carried his severed arm in its mouth.

"He was dead. The children of Anubis had taken him. As I bent over him, I could see the last trickle of his blood. I froze. The sight filled me with dread.

"Then I remembered: your sister. I rushed back to the tomb. "And in those unsupervised moments, Stephanie had taken up my translation of the *Book of Anubis* and began to read it aloud to herself. I heard her voice as I approached the tomb's entrance and rushed to stop her.

"When I reached the door, I shouted an order for her to stop. She looked up from the scroll and laughed at me, Mr. Brandt. *Laughed* at me.

"Knowing what she must have done, I glanced from her to the mummy. Its eyelid fluttered. It might have been a trick of the dancing light from the lanterns, but how could I be certain? I rushed across the room and took a firm hold of her hand. 'Put that down, miss. We have to leave here.' And again she laughed at me.

"Imhotep's eyes opened. Slowly, as if waking from so long a sleep was painful in the extreme. But there could no longer be any doubt. This was no illusion caused by the lanterns. This was life. The words of the *Book of Anubis* had brought life back to him.

"Deliberately, so slowly I could almost feel it ache, Imhotep's right hand worked free of the bandages and slid down across his abdomen to his side. I took a tighter hold on your sister and pulled her back against the tomb wall. She had still not grasped what was happening, and she struggled to escape me.

"Before I had time to react, Imhotep sprang between us and the entrance. Then he was upon us. He caught one of us by the throat with each hand, and his strength was awesome. There was no way I could get free of him. He held me at arm's length and stared into my eyes. His own were like polished black marbles.

"Then he turned to Stephanie. She was crying and screaming hysterically. Imhotep's lips parted, and he began to mutter some words in the ancient language. His voice was a dry rasp:

he sounded older than the desert, and I could not understand the words. But slowly, Stephanie became quiet. She stood holding his hand, as she might have her father's. And he spoke: from his long-dead lips came the single name Ankh-es-en-amun.

"Then he turned to me again. His grip on my throat grew tighter. I could feel myself becoming faint, and the strength was fast draining from my limbs. But as I struggled, my shirt tore open. And he saw on my chest an ancient amulet, an image of Anubis. It was stolen from an old tomb, and it didn't really mean a thing to me, but the sight of it made him stop. He pushed me against the tomb wall, and I collapsed to the floor.

"The living mummy looked to Stephanie again, and he resumed whatever spell he had been speaking. Then, apparently satisfied with what he had done, he lurched toward the door and left us.

"I rushed to see where he was going and what he would do, and he looked back as if to warn me not to follow. Then he walked, slowly, stately as befits a god, out into the great desert. By the moon's cold light I saw the jackals follow him. That was all."

Ahmed held his glass out to Josh. "More wine, if you please."

Josh poured it, filling his glass nearly to the rim. "Mr. Abd-er-Rasul, please forgive my rudeness in asking, but how much of what you said is true?"

"Rudeness, Mr. Brandt, is precisely the word."

"Nonetheless, I want to know."

Ahmed took a long drink and grinned at him. "I know it is proper to sip wine, not to drink it down all at once. But I am suddenly feeling very mortal."

"Please, answer my question."

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Ahmed hiccupped. "Excuse me, please. Everything I've just told you is quite reliably accurate, Mr. Brandt."

"And why have you never told it to anyone before?"

"You find my tale hard to believe. And you have been face to face with Imhotep. You of all people should be able to take my tale seriously."

"I have been— No!"

"You are slow to grasp obvious facts, young American."

Josh decided Ahmed was playing with him, though he could not decide to what extent. It was time for him to try and take control of the conversation. "You were with my father when he died. If what you say is true, you were there. You should have told us, or told the authorities, rather than letting everyone believe that he simply . . . vanished."

"I do not believe I ever used the word *simply*."

"Don't split hairs with me, Mr. Abd-er-Rasul. Please. We are talking about my father, after all. I don't remember much about him, but I remember that I loved him, and he loved me."

"Is that what Americans call 'traditional family values'?"

"I'm finding your . . . your irreverence more and more inappropriate, sir."

"You have my sincere apologies, then. Please, forgive my tactlessness. A host should be more gracious."

"He certainly should." He paused, not certain whether to press, then decided to make his demand. "I want to see the tomb."

For the first time since they'd met, Ahmed seemed genuinely surprised. "I beg your pardon?"

"Imhotep's tomb. The place where my father died. I want to see it."

Ahmed's face registered concern. "Are you serious? It is out at the edge of the Sahara. Tourists never go there."

"I am not a tourist. Not any more. My family's blood is in the earth here. I have to see. I have to *know*."

The old man closed his eyes. It seemed unlikely he had nodded off—not after such a strange conversation; Josh decided he must be considering the request.

"Please, Ahmed. Mr. Abd-er-Rasul. You have kept this quiet for a generation. My family—we've never known what happened to him." Pointedly he added, "You owe us at least this much."

Ahmed opened his eyes and glared. "You are being a fool. Did you not hear my story?"

"I heard it. I want to see."

"Refill my glass, please."

"The bottle is empty."

"Ah. That is life in small, isn't it? I'd send you for another, but the wine is my own little secret. The family would be scandalized." He laughed at his own impertinence. "Look at me, Mr. Brandt."

"Please, will you call me Josh?"

"Josh." Ahmed sat up and inched his way, apparently painfully, to the edge of the bed. "Look at me. I am the oldest man I know. I have a decade on your oldest living ex-president." Again he chuckled at his little joke. "How could I make such a journey?"

"Let one of your sons take me, or one of your grandsons."

"It is dangerous."

"You survived."

"They would find your request odd."

"Let them."

Ahmed closed his eyes, opened them, and looked directly at Josh, then exhaled deeply. "You are right, I'm afraid. I have done your family a disservice. But tell me, how could I have done otherwise? You were a child, and your mother was . . .

your mother. Who could I have told who would have understood and believed?"

"You didn't have to wait until now. You could have—"

"Why do you think I wanted to see you? Why do you think I sent Haroun, when you were in Luxor last? When did I have the opportunity to tell you, before then?"

"If you understand that you owe me, then have someone guide me to Imhotep's tomb."

Ahmed tried to stand up, and faltered.

Josh rushed to his side to help him. "Please, sir. I'll do anything I can to express my gratitude. Just name it."

"No. No reward is necessary. I have an obligation to your family, as you say. It is time I discharged it." Ahmed got heavily to his feet and pointed at a large oak wardrobe in the opposite corner. "There."

Leaning on Josh heavily, the old man crossed the room to it. From the bottom of the wardrobe he took a small chest. Inside was an old hand-drawn map. He unrolled it carefully. "Handle this well, Mr. Brandt. There are no other copies."

Josh took it. It was small, six inches by six, and it was crudely drawn. But there was a clear indication of the tomb's location. A red X marked the spot.

Also in the chest was a small charm on what appeared to be a golden chain. Ahmed lifted it out with his index finger and let it dangle in front of Josh's eyes. It was an image of Anubis.

"This is the amulet you spoke of? The one that kept Imhotep from—?"

"Wear it, Mr. Brandt. I don't know that it is what protected me. Imhotep might simply have sensed my Egyptian blood. But wear it nonetheless. It can certainly do no harm. And if I might make one more point . . ."

"Please."

"Do not sneer at theology."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Our ancestors worshiped more than seven hundred and fifty gods. Is it really such an outlandish suggestion that one of them might still be alive? Gods and godlings do not perish, they simply . . . withdraw from our affairs. Consider that."

"I . . . I will." He thought it was nonsense, but he didn't want to risk offending Ahmed any more than he had already.

"Now please call Haroun, if you will."

Josh helped him back to his bed, then went to the door. Haroun was waiting just outside, and Josh gestured to him. "He wants you."

Haroun went straight to his grandfather's side, and Ahmed took hold of his galabia, pulled him close, and whispered something in his ear. Haroun's eyes widened and he gaped at Josh. Not knowing how else to react, Josh smiled at him.

There was a long, whispered exchange, and finally Haroun straightened up. The expression on his face was hard to interpret; it could have been concern, disapproval, even outright fear. Without moving, he said to Josh, "You really wish to do this?"

"I do."

"My grandfather says it will be good for his soul if our family helps you."

"I appreciate that."

"He has instructed me to take you to the place shown on the map he has given you."

"Thank you, Haroun. I am in your debt." Josh handed it to him.

He unrolled it. "Do not be hasty in your judgment, Mr. Brandt. I have agreed to go out of a sense of religious obligation, that is all."

Josh was still holding his wine glass. Quickly he drained it. "I'm afraid I don't understand." Haroun looked suspiciously

from him to Ahmed and back. Then he scowled at Ahmed. "You have become incorrigible in your old age, Grandfather."

"I always was. You don't know." Ahmed seemed quite pleased with himself.

Josh stepped between them. "I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean about this being a religious obligation, Haroun."

"Of course not. You are no believer. But the Lord has seen fit to darken your reason and make you mad. This makes you sacred." He smiled an ironic smile. "At least a bit."

Josh had no idea how to react to this. Haroun would do what he wanted, but for a reason he found quite insulting. Glumly he decided not to question his good fortune. The family mystery was about to be solved, perhaps more than one mystery, even. As long as he was getting what he wanted, what did it matter if Haroun thought him insane?

He took the map, rolled it, and put it in his shirt pocket, thanked them both, and walked back to the hotel.

The desk clerk gave him his key. "And are you enjoying your stay in Luxor, Mr. Brandt?"

"To be honest, I'm feeling a dozen different things. I don't know where I am."

The clerk looked around, obviously puzzled by this. "This is the lobby of the Winter Palace, sir."

"Yes. Of course it is." For the first time all day, Josh found himself laughing.

CHAPTER 16

The next morning, the Egyptian sun seemed even more blindingly bright than usual. Josh and Jim met Haroun in the lobby of the Winter Palace at 9 A.M. They were both outfitted in what they imagined was the correct clothing for an expedition to the desert. And they had a whole array of equipment—lanterns, digging tools, a tent . . . plus enough food for three days. They bought it all at a shop in the hotel which specialized in selling that kind of thing to tourists.

Jim was skeptical about the need for all of it. "Don't you think you're going overboard? We'll be back by sunset."

"Ahmed said the tomb is a half day's journey out to the desert. A half day to get there and a half day back—that would only leave us a few minutes to explore the place."

"It's a tomb. How much exploring could we do?"

"I'm buying more than I think we'll need. I was an Eagle Scout, remember? I want to be prepared."

"Didn't they train Eagle Scouts to have any common sense? For the fifth time, Josh, you can't possibly believe the nonsense that man told you."

"For the fifth time, I don't know what else to believe. My dad died out there, Jim. Now will you please stop it? This is important to me. I'll go alone if you don't want to come."

But Jim wouldn't allow that. "Josh, I'm telling you again, you're letting this mess run away with your common sense. What do you know about traveling in the Sahara?"

"Not a damn thing. But I have to go."

"You're crazy."

"You're not the first one to say so lately."

"Well, I'm going along. I can't let you do something this reckless on your own."

"Come if you want. You can help me bury my father's remains."

"Oh, sure. They'll still be there, just waiting for us." He scowled. "And that's assuming there's any truth at all to this harebrained story."

"I'm going. You can come if you want to."

"Fine."

But Jim had spent the rest of that day and the first part of the following morning trying to talk him out of it, to no avail.

Haroun, like Jim, was in a bad mood when they met in the lobby, though he hid it well. "Good morning, gentlemen. I have arranged for four camels. They will be waiting when we cross the river."

"Fine, Haroun. Thank you." Josh decided he had to work at being pleasant; otherwise, the journey might prove unbearable. He was tense; the prospect of finding his father had him . . . he couldn't quite decide what name to give the emotion. Part of him suspected that Haroun and Jim were right, and he was being an incredible fool; he forced himself not to think about it.

"Let's get moving, okay?"

The three of them lugged all of Josh's provisions and equipment down to the dock. It was fairly obvious from his manner that Haroun thought Josh was overdoing things, too. "Can we not have some of the porters from the hotel help us with these things?"

"We're leaving on an expedition, Haroun. Let's be bold."

The ferry was crowded with tourists, most of them German, apparently. They were beaming, to all appearances in a buoyant

mood. Josh commented on it to Jim. "Look, why can't you be more like them?"

"They're on holiday. They have every reason to be happy. We're—I don't even know what we're doing."

"Don't start again, Jim. Please."

Jim muttered something under his breath and went to the rail to watch the river.

Haroun asked Josh if he'd ever been in the desert.

"Las Vegas, once, that's all. I was there to close a business deal. As a matter of fact, the hotel where I stayed was called the Sahara."

"There are no luxury hotels where we are going."

"No, I didn't think so."

The ferry bumped roughly into the pier on the western bank, and the passengers all disembarked. Jim was the first; he jumped to shore, stretched, looked around, and called to Haroun, "Where is your man with our camels?"

Haroun rushed down the gangplank to him. "He is a cousin of mine."

"As long as I've been working in the Middle East, Haroun, everyone I've ever met has had cousins, or uncles, or brothers-in-law, who happened to be in just the business I needed at the moment. That's the great mystery here, not any desert tomb."

"You object to cousins who are given work, sir?"

It stung. "Be quiet, will you?" Jim snapped.

"You should try and be more like Mr. Brandt, Mr. Huntingdon." He smiled and went to join Josh, who was nearly the last one off the ferry. "My cousin's stable is a twenty-minute walk south from here, along the river."

"Well, let's get moving, then." Again he smiled his most cordial smile.

They walked along the Nile, lugging their supplies. There were palm trees and lush flowering shrubs. Climbing the sides

of the trees and scampering among the bushes were beautiful, brightly colored lizards. Even though it was broad daylight, there were frogs croaking. Josh commented on them; Haroun and Jim kept silent.

When they reached the stable, Haroun's cousin, Mageet, was waiting with three mounts for them and one for their supplies. Josh paid him, added a generous tip, and Mageet ordered the camels to lie down.

"Have you ever ridden one of these, Mr. Brandt?" Mageet asked.

"No, but I'm a good horseman."

"It is not quite the same thing." He helped Josh into the saddle of one of them. "You will find these animals more temperamental. As you see, there is only one rein. And there is no regular gait. They place each step precisely, so they are ideally suited for uneven desert terrain."

"I see."

When all three were in their saddles, Mageet clapped his hands and the animals stood up; a series of violent jerks nearly threw Josh off, but he scrambled to hold onto the edge of the saddle. Jim laughed at him, loud and long. "The bold desert explorer."

"Shut up."

Mageet gave Jim and Josh quick instructions for controlling their mounts, and without a word Haroun set off, leaving them to follow.

They crossed the wide Theban Plain at a leisurely pace; even though the camel's gait wasn't quite rhythmic, Josh found himself relaxing and watching the landscape as it passed. Scattered in the distance around the plain were the ruined temples and damaged colossi he had noted before. The sun was blazing hot. Oddly, he thought, there were no birds in sight.

It took them more than two hours to ride south along the Nile, then cross the plain at the base of the Theban Hills.

They were miles from the entrances to the Valleys of the Kings and Queens, the only places Josh had explored. He was beginning to feel lost, and he hoped Ahmed's map was reliable and Haroun was reading it correctly. Haroun took them steadily south, along the foothills.

Finally, after another hour, a pass opened up. Haroun asked Josh for the map. After inspecting it for a moment he nodded in satisfaction and said, "Yes, this is the way."

Without another word he handed the map back to Josh and turned his camel into the pass. Jim and Josh looked at each other, shrugged, and followed.

The pass was not wide. Steep hills on both sides to them seemed to get closer as they traveled.

Josh pulled his camel up beside Jim's. "Do you realize we haven't seen anyone else since we left the stable?"

"And what does that tell you, Joshua?"

"That we really are on an adventure."

"Or that you really are crazy."

Haroun had overheard this, but he pretended not to, and focused on the hills around them.

The sun was beginning to descend now, but the air was just as hot. Josh found himself drinking his water faster than he should; his canteen was half-empty. He'd have to use more self-control.

"Haroun," he called, "Does this place have a name?"

The walls of the pass were getting narrower. Haroun looked back over his shoulder. "None that I ever heard."

Suddenly, unexpectedly, he reined his camel to the right, up a fairly steep path. "Brace yourselves, gentlemen. From here on, our journey will not be so pleasant."

Jim barked, "Who said it was?"

The hillside was littered with small stones. In the distance a small animal watched them, then decided they were dangerous and scampered away. Josh asked, "Was that a jackal, Haroun?"

"No sir, a fox."

"Oh."

Haroun seemed unperturbed by the steepness of the path, but both Jim and Josh kept slipping backward in their saddles; they had to work to keep from falling off. Jim's Camel kicked a rock at one point, and a large snake slithered out, disappearing down a hole.

"A cobra, gentlemen." Haroun was unruffled as ever. "One of the gods of ancient Egypt."

Josh decided he had had nearly enough of the old gods. But it seemed tactful not to say so.

They climbed for more than half an hour. Then, abruptly, the path leveled out. Ahead of them stretched a broad plateau. At the far side, miles in the distance, it descended in a gentle grade instead of another steep one. And then, beyond it, opened the wide expanse of the Sahara. Under the afternoon sun, its sands had a distinct reddish cast.

The bright sunlight brought everything into unnaturally sharp relief; it was a landscape out of a dream. The sea of sand stretched to the far horizon; for a dizzying moment Josh had the sense it went on to infinity. Like the gods. He had to force the thought out of his mind.

"The desert, gentlemen, is timeless." For the first time, Haroun was not smiling. "And limitless. And deadly. History records that an entire Persian army, on its way to seize the great desert oracle at the Siwa oasis, became lost and was never seen again. An entire army, gentlemen, engulfed, vanished. Think of that."

"I'd rather not." Jim took a long drink from his canteen. "I don't think I've seen you drink, Haroun."

"No, sir, I have not."

"Are you part camel?"

"Please don't be quite so condescending. I have sense enough to realize we may need our water later, that is all."

The sun was halfway down the western sky, directly ahead of them, but the day seemed to be getting hotter and hotter. And there was no breeze, not the least puff. In time, the plateau tapered down to a few long, broad fingers of stone projecting out into the desert sand. Haroun led them along one of them as it sloped down to meet the Sahara.

Josh scanned the horizon impatiently. "Are we there? Where is the tomb? I can't see anything but sand."

"The tomb is below and behind us, Mr. Brandt. We are making the most gradual descent possible. I thought you would appreciate that."

"Well, I do," Jim said, "even if my cousin, here, doesn't."

Haroun ignored him. "When we reach the level of the desert, Mr. Brandt, we shall turn left and double back. The tomb was cut out of the living rock we are descending at this moment."

"I see. And why would they have buried Imhotep here, so far from all the kings and nobles?"

"Imhotep was timeless, like death itself. Have you ever seen a place more timeless than this? You could return a thousand years from today, and nothing here will have changed."

"Nothing? At all?"

"Look below, Mr. Brandt."

To their left, the rock fell off steeply; Josh was grateful they were making a more gentle descent. But at the bottom, below them, he could see a small temple. It was very much in the classic Egyptian style. The columns were topped with lotus capitals, and the entire building was painted with riotous colors, greens, reds, blues.

"The funerary temple of Imhotep, gentlemen, adjacent to his tomb, which is cut into the cliff nearby," Haroun explained quietly, "directly beneath our feet. It is one of the best-preserved in Egypt, though very few people know of its existence."

"And how do *you* know, Haroun?" Jim was growing more and more testy.

"We have a map. Have you forgotten? Besides, it is my family's business to know the ancient past." He looked back over a shoulder. "Here we may begin our descent to the desert."

He reined his camel sharply to the left, and the others followed. The slope was more gradual than the one they'd climbed to the top of the plateau, and the animals moved quickly. Josh checked his watch; it was nearly four o'clock. Ahmed's warning that the tomb was half a day's ride from Luxor was quite accurate.

Fifteen minutes later they reached the temple. Haroun made the camels lie down so their riders could dismount. Jim's seemed to fall out from under him; he nearly tumbled off. When he was finally on the ground, the camel turned its head and spit on him.

"Shit."

Josh laughed, crossed to the camel, and stroked its neck. "Good boy."

"There," Haroun announced, "is the tomb."

Here and there, patches of scrub grass dotted the sand, and there were a few stunted bushes scattered about. Haroun tethered the camels to the largest of them.

At the base of the cliff, twenty yards from the temple, the entrance gaped. Inside, despite the angle of the declining sun, it was pitch black.

Josh peered at it. "All the other tombs—the ones in the Valley of the Kings, I mean—all of them have barred doors. Why doesn't this one?"

"The gates are installed by the Antiquities Service, as a safeguard against destructive or acquisitive tourists. What tourist would ever come here?"

Jim was about to make a wisecrack, but Josh glared at him, and he kept quiet.

"Where can we pitch our tent, Haroun?"

"Anyplace you like, Mr. Brandt." He grinned. "There is no one to stop you, except perhaps Imhotep himself."

"Very funny. Let's put it over here." He gestured to a spot in the shadow of the temple.

"As you wish."

They got the tent up. Josh and Haroun wrestled with it but finally figured out how to make it stable. Then they unpacked the supplies.

Jim stood by and watched. Then, bored, he ambled idly into the temple. There was a small courtyard with dozens of lotus columns. Then, beyond, came the inner sanctum, the holy of holies. It was perfectly dark. He got out a flashlight and stepped inside.

At once, the air around him was filled with wild shrieking. A flock of bats had been sleeping there, and he had disturbed them. They swooped around his head, brushing his face with their wings, then flew off to some other part of the desert. Rattled, he came stumbling back outside.

Josh saw him and broke out laughing.

"Be quiet, Josh, or I'll tie you up in there and the bats will feast on your blood when they come back."

But Josh laughed all the harder. "Come on. I want to see the tomb."

"No, thanks. There are probably more bats in it."

"Are you going to be a stick-in-the-mud the whole time till we get back to Luxor?"

"You find me some mud and see."

"You insisted on coming along on this trip, remember?"

"Don't remind me."

Josh got a pair of flashlights. "Come on, Haroun."

They headed briskly for the tomb entrance; Jim sat on the sand and watched them, glaring.

It was much like every other tomb Josh had seen in Egypt. The builders had cut it directly into the cliff. The entrance was carved with elaborate hieroglyphs and images of Anubis.

Haroun pointed to one set of symbols. "Here. The name of Imhotep."

They stepped inside. The entry chamber was enormous, thirty yards by twenty. It must have taken years, and thousands of man-hours. Josh found it a bit of a marvel.

In the center of the chamber were two large camp tables, six feet by eight, covered with the dust and debris of years. Josh realized they must have been his father's. But all the other things Ahmed had described as being in the tomb were nowhere to be seen.

He swept the walls with his light. A procession of gods, goddesses, and demons marched, stately, along the walls, to the next chamber. Isis, Osiris, Horus, Set, Ptah, Khnum . . .

There was a beast, part lion, part hippo, part crocodile. Haroun traced it with a fingertip. "The Devourer of Souls."

"Splendid."

"You know the myths, Mr. Brandt. Osiris was killed by his evil brother Set, cut into pieces. Isis collected them, reassembled, them, and reanimated her poor husband. Look, here is Osiris with green skin, to symbolize the new life that sprang from his flesh. And there, on the opposite wall, he is shown with skin jet black, to represent the earth in which he was buried for a time."

"Cheerful religion your ancestors had. Didn't they have any gods who weren't connected with death?"

"Death is the only immutable fact, Mr. Brandt." Then he shrugged. "Death, and perhaps the gods themselves."

"Even so, once in a while, didn't they find time to worship a pleasant one?"

"There is Isis. She was the benevolent mother. The one who nourished everything that is."

Josh looked at him, not wanting to give away the fact that he found that concept so alien. But he said, "A benevolent mother. Imagine that."

At the far end of the chamber, flanking the door to the inner parts of the tomb, were two symmetrical representations of Anubis. The jackal gazed directly ahead, as if into infinity. Between his forepaws, much smaller in proportion, was the figure of a man. Haroun gestured at them. "Anubis and Imhotep, the Great God of the Dead and the Lesser God of the Dead. There were so many gods, enough to account for all creation. In its way, it must have been quite a satisfying system of belief."

"And perhaps not, Haroun. Other gods have taken their place."

"More's the pity, sir."

"The world may be a better place for having forgotten them."

"As you say, Mr. Brandt." He didn't believe it for a moment.

Josh leaned against one of the tables. "I didn't think these would still be here."

"Who would have moved them, sir?"

"The same people who took everything else your grandfather described."

"These are hardly ancient treasures."

"No. Of course not."

Then, in the farthest corner of the chamber, his light fell on the golden sarcophagus and, propped next to it against the wall, the wooden coffin of Imhotep, its lid to one side. So that part of Ahmed's story, at least, had been true. Josh looked at Haroun but didn't say a word. The coffin was empty. But that must have been because the mummy and its jewels had been stolen.

From the inmost part of the tomb came an agitated chittering sound.

"Bats." Haroun smiled. "Mr. Huntingdon was correct about that."

"If nothing else."

"I would suggest we not explore the rest of the tomb till after dark, when they will have flown away. And there may be

other creatures in the deeper recesses. An open hole in the desert does not remain unoccupied for long."

"That makes good sense. We'll come back after sunset. Besides, I'm getting hungry. And my cousin may turn more agreeable if he gets something to eat." He hesitated. "Are there a great many bats, do you think?"

"Almost certainly."

"Then they'll be waking soon. Let's go."

Haroun nodded. "If you are certain you wish to be in this place after dark."

"Why not?"

"Never mind, sir."

After they had unpacked the last of their provisions, Josh suggested they light a fire. They sat on the ground and opened packages of food; Jim had even brought a bag of potato chips. It was past seven o'clock, and the sun shone on them at a steep angle; the temple's shadow stretched sixty yards to the east.

There wasn't much talk. But Josh commented that he was glad he'd planned to spend the night there. The journey was so long, they'd have barely had time to see anything before they'd have had to go back.

Jim looked around. "There's not much to see."

"Good, then we can examine it all thoroughly."

When they had eaten and rested for a while, Josh decided to take a stroll, "to walk off dinner," as he said.

"There wasn't enough to need walking off."

"Are you going to stop at all, Jim?"

"Yes, when I'm back in my bed at the Winter Palace."

Josh decided to ignore him. "I'll be back in a while."

The sun was just above the horizon, and it blazed a brilliant deep orange. To the east, above the hills, the sky was already beginning to darken. He headed out into the desert and around the stretch of rock they'd come down. With the dying

sun, the air was taking on a chill edge. He tripped over a large rock with the toe of his boot, and the largest spider he'd ever seen scuttled out; it was eight inches across, and its legs were covered with thick brown hairs. Alarmed, he jumped back and away from it. The desert held its terrors, and he knew it, but he also knew he had to be there. He had to see and to know.

Before he quite realized it, he was twenty minutes from the tomb and the camp. A long valley opened out to his right, stretching into the hills between two more of those long ridges of stone. At the head of it, some fifty yards away from where he was standing, he saw a small structure, just a few feet up in the hillside. He looked back in the direction he'd come from, but their camp was already out of sight. He decided to check the building out.

It was farther away than it had looked at first; it took him nearly fifteen minutes to reach it. And it was a shrine, in the old Egyptian style; to all appearances it was ancient. The front pylon was covered in reliefs of the gods. He scanned them and tried to decide which one of them the place had been devoted to.

Then on the ground to the left of the shrine, something white caught his eye. Almost at once he realized it was a human skull. He looked around; the ground was scattered with bones. There weren't enough to make a complete skeleton, but there were at least several dozen of them. A soft breeze began to blow in off the desert.

To himself he whispered, "Dad."

Saying it, he felt foolish. It could be his father, yes, but it could be almost anyone. He didn't even know enough anatomy to be certain it was a male.

The sun notched the horizon. It would be dark before much longer. He had to work quickly. With no tools, there was nothing to do but get down on his knees and begin to dig with his hands. The earth was soft and sandy. As he was digging, he

told himself he was being absurd, that the first strong desert wind would uncover it again. But he had to bury it. Everyone deserved to be laid properly to rest. And if these really were the remains of his father . . .

Just as the last glint of sunlight disappeared below the horizon, he finished his work and stood over the makeshift grave. And softly, so that only he and the gods could hear, he whispered a prayer. It spoke of thanks, and hope, and gratitude that his cousin hadn't come walking with him. He would only have laughed, and that was the last thing Josh needed, just then.

Night fell quickly. Josh walked back to camp more slowly than before; and he watched the sky as more stars than he had ever seen emerged from the blackness. The moon was past full; it wouldn't rise for a time, yet.

Haroun had built a fire, not far from the temple. He and Jim were sitting by it and talking. When Josh reached them, they looked up at him questioningly; but neither one of them asked him where he had been. He sat down with them and enjoyed the fire's warmth.

"Is there enough wood around to keep it going, Haroun?"

"We can find scrub, Mr. Brandt."

"Good."

They talked about this and that, killing time. Josh was grateful that Jim seemed to have shaken off his mood for whining and complaining about everything.

Haroun asked what America was like.

"You've never been there?" Jim seemed genuinely surprised.

"No, Mr. Huntingdon, never. There never seemed much point."

"No point to America, Haroun?"

Instead of answering, Haroun poked at the fire with a stick. Jim launched into a long description of what he called the marvels of his homeland. It became quickly apparent to Josh that Jim was telling Haroun a lot more than he wanted to know, but Jim was oblivious and kept on talking.

After a while, Haroun got out his guitar-like instrument and began to play and sing. It was the only entertainment on hand, so Jim and Josh fell silent, listened, and complimented him.

There was a metallic clicking sound in the night, not far from them. It started, stopped, then started again and went on with remarkable persistence. Jim asked what it was.

"A cobra, sir. That is what they sound like when they sing."

"Sing? You're not serious. They're reptiles."

"Even so, sir."

The "singing" continued for a while, then stopped again. But the cobra had not left. Instead it crawled to within three feet of the fire, reared up, and spread its hood.

"Do not move, gentlemen. It will leave."

Josh remained calm and silent; Jim froze and looked mildly panicked. "What can we do?" he asked.

"As I said, remain still."

"Suppose it doesn't go away?"

"Then we shall remain still for a long time."

"Haroun, do something."

Haroun remained quiet for a long moment. Then slowly he said, "The cobra was one of the ancient gods, the god of Upper Egypt. You have seen it on the crowns of the statues of the pharaohs." He paused and looked from Josh to Jim. "Perhaps it is here to reclaim its rights."

"Don't be absurd, Haroun." Jim was looking more and more frightened. He began to inch backward, away from the fire. "I hate snakes. There has to be something we can do."

"I am not being absurd, Mr. Huntingdon. The gods do not die. Sometimes their worship does, but they themselves never perish."

Josh spoke for the first time since the snake appeared there. "Your father said much the same thing, Haroun. Do you really believe it?"

Haroun didn't answer.

But Jim couldn't take the suspense any longer. He jumped up and backed quickly away from the fire. The snake turned swiftly toward him, hissing loudly. Jim bolted and ran into the tomb, to what he must have thought was safety.

Almost at once, the earth began to shake. Loud cries filled the air, shrieks, as if somewhere in the depths of the desert a chorus of unseen women was mourning. Dust and debris, jarred loose from the top of the temple, fell to the ground not far from Haroun and Josh. The camels, in a blind panic, tore themselves loose from the shrubs they were tethered to and bolted toward the hills. "Stop them, Haroun!"

Haroun didn't move an inch.

Josh looked to the tomb, and there was a dim but distinct green light there. Streamers of mist began to snake their way from the tomb entrance, glowing faintly, apparently by the light from the fire. From inside the tomb came Jim's voice, screaming as if he was in terrible pain. Josh jumped to his feet. Then, remembering the cobra, he turned to face it. But it was gone, vanished.

"Come on, Haroun, we've go to see what's wrong with him."

Josh grabbed a flashlight and dashed to the tomb. Stopping at the entrance, he looked in. There was light inside, faint green light. It was not coming from anywhere he could see. But on the floor, near the exact center of the entrance chamber, Jim lay, not moving.

"Jim."

He didn't respond, didn't move.

"Jim, for god's sake answer me!"

Josh stepped inside and bent over his cousin. There was not the slightest breath. He got down on one knee and touched Jim's face. It had gone cold as the stone around them.

"Jim, no."

He felt for a pulse. There was none. Jim was dead, inexplicably, irrevocably dead. All Josh could think was, *another one of us gone, here.*

Haroun was still outside; he hadn't followed. Josh stepped out of the tomb and said, loudly, "He's gone, Haroun. Dead."

"Are you surprised, sir?"

"It should have been me." He looked back into the tomb, then at Haroun again. "It should have been me."

"I believe my father warned you about this place."

"I should be dead, Haroun. Like all the rest."

"Look." Haroun pointed out to the desert. There was a light—flickering, dancing in the night, apparently from a torch. It seemed to be moving toward them. "Perhaps you shall have that wish before long. I am leaving, Mr. Brandt. This is no place for me."

Josh couldn't focus; tears were beginning to fill his eyes.

"Come and help me. We'll have to bury him."

Instead of answering Haroun began to walk off toward the hills. He didn't bother to take a light.

"Haroun!"

He didn't respond or even look toward Josh; he only kept walking.

"Haroun, for god's sake, come back here. At least help me bury my cousin." He started to run after him, then caught himself. What would have been the point?

And in only a few short moments Haroun had disappeared into the night.

Josh stood midway between the tomb and the temple, looking cautiously around. It took a moment for his acute aloneness to dawn on him, to really sink in. Haroun was gone, and the camels had run off; he was stranded, helpless. There were sounds in the night, none of them especially loud or menacing, but they disturbed him nonetheless.

Out in the desert, that light was still moving toward him. It was a lantern; someone—he couldn't see who—was carrying it, walking across the sand in his direction. He stood watching it as it moved nearer and nearer. Behind him the waning moon crept above the hills. Its white light made shadows—his own, the temple's. Should he hide? Where could he hide that wouldn't be obvious to—to whomever it was?

A man. It was a man in a galabia, holding the lantern out in front of him, leading a camel with another man on top. They continued toward Josh, not hurrying, as if they knew they had all the time in the world.

Maqmir. The man with the lamp was Maqmir.

Then, gradually by the moon's light, he was able to make out that the man on the camel was Ardath Bey.

When he realized it, it seemed inevitable to him. Oddly, improbably, he felt himself relaxing. At least this—whatever this was—would be over soon. It was a relief. He stood perfectly still and watched them till they were twenty feet away.

"Ardath Bey. Why am I not surprised to see you here?"

Maqmir led the camel to the very front of the temple, then stopped. The animal knelt, then lay down, and Ardath Bey stepped gracefully from its back. His galabia was pure white. In the moonlight it seemed almost ghostly.

Finally, he spoke. "Mr. Brandt. Good evening. And welcome to this mystical place."

Josh stiffened slightly. He decided not to let himself be intimidated. "My cousin has met with an accident, Ardath Bey. Can you have your man help me bury him?"

Ardath Bey and Maqmir exchanged glances, then smiled at one another.

"There is no need, Mr. Brandt."

"He's dead. Do you understand that, for God's sake? My cousin has died."

"Nonsense. He is merely sleeping."

Josh couldn't believe he was hearing this. Ardath Bey was cold, but even he should have felt some trace of compassion. "You are not terribly amusing," he said. "My family have died, one by one, and somehow you are involved. Is that not right?"

"I am involved in death, yes." He gestured to Maqmir, who made the camel stand again and led it off, back out into the desert. Then he turned to Josh again. "Is it possible, Mr. Brandt, that you still do not understand who and what I am, and what has happened to your line?"

Possibilities had indeed occurred to him, but he didn't want to confront them. "You have stalked my family relentlessly. I assume you are now going to murder me. Could you at least have the decency to tell me why?"

From his sleeve, Ardath Bey produced a large rolled papyrus. He handled it carefully, the way a priest might handle a holy thing. "This is the *Book of Anubis*. The very book your father was looking for—and found. But he also found me, Mr. Brandt."

Don't say it, Josh thought. *Please, don't tell me what I know and fear.*

But Ardath Bey unrolled the papyrus, carefully, gingerly. "You do not read hieroglyphs, I believe?"

"No. Of course not."

His finger ran down a row of symbols. "These are the words. 'Death feeds life tenfold. The dead foster the living unto eternity. The dead create life ten times ten.'" He smiled an ironic smile at Josh. "My own life has been enormously long. And it has been fed with the lives of . . . shall we say of unbelievers? Of those skeptical of the power of the Great God Anubis?"

A faint sound came from the direction of the tomb. Alarmed, afraid it might be the cobra again, or worse, Josh looked around. But there was nothing visible.

"I architected this society, Mr. Brandt. Well, let us say I helped. The greatest civilization the world has ever known, or ever will. Five thousand years after their building, men still stand before the pyramids and marvel, still gaze into the face of the Sphinx and try to guess its secret.

"I built this. I built a great part of it. And the gods rewarded me by taking me into their number. A minor god, a servant to the others, yet one of them. I have returned before, to tend to the culture I made great. And besides life, I have even known love, that other gift of the gods, the love of a beautiful princess. When your father awakened me . . ." Again he smiled.

"So you believe that you are the legendary Imhotep." Frightened as he was, Josh found himself laughing. This madman had killed his family. Based on nothing more than a religious delusion.

Slowly, Ardath Bey began to circle him, a wide circle, ten yards across. Josh tensed; this insane man had to be watched carefully.

"Your sister was such a sweet little girl. The day she wakened me, she was wearing a little denim skirt and a red blouse. Do you remember?"

Josh turned to keep facing him as he circled. Yes, he had a faint memory of that outfit. But—but—what the man was saying didn't make any sense. "How can you know that? Were you dogging us even then?"

"I know, Mr. Brandt, because I was there." He pointed to the tomb.

"No!"

"You are being a bigger fool than I expected."

"I'd be a fool to believe you."

The circle Ardath Bey was making around Josh became, very gradually, smaller and tighter. Josh began to sense it and took a few steps toward the temple. He pressed his back against the cold, hard stone.

"You know the old stories, Mr. Brandt. *Myths*, men like you call them. How living things were sacrificed to the gods, and how those lives fed the gods."

"Let me go. Please, Ardath Bey. My camels must be in the hills somewhere not far away. I'll—I'll leave you alone, if you leave me and my sister alone." Then he realized, with startling abruptness, that Ardath Bey's eyes were glowing. *This isn't possible*, he told himself. *This isn't happening.*

"The lives of the sacrificed feed the long lives of the gods. The lives of your sisters and cousins have fed *my* life. It is here." He held out the *Book of Anubis*, as if Josh might read it or make any sense of it at all. "And when the goddesses conceived and gave birth, the lives of the sacrificed made their terms swift and painless. 'Death feeds life tenfold. The dead create the living ten times ten.'"

This meant nothing to Josh. He pressed himself hard against the temple wall and looked around wildly for some way to escape.

"Do you still doubt that I am who I claim to be, Mr. Joshua Brandt? Do you still not understand that I am Imhotep?"

"You're insane, that's all I know about you. Please, let me go."

"You should never have disturbed the tomb of my beloved Ankh-es-en-Amun. You should have grasped that I had placed her soul elsewhere. And that once she was housed there, other spirits joined her, to protect her."

The moon was higher in the sky, now. Its light bathed the landscape, made everything ghostly. The fire was dying down.

"Watch. Watch and believe." From under his robe he drew a silver knife. For a startling instant it caught the moonlight and reflected it into Josh's face. Then slowly Ardath Bey pulled up his sleeve. He plunged the knife into his wrist and drew it steadily the length of his arm.

Instead of blood, something bright green and glowing flowed from his veins. "You see? It is what the Greeks called *ichor*, the substance that flows in the veins of the divine." Drops of it fell to the ground and evaporated into greenish smoke, hissing slightly.

"No! This is not possible!" Josh was close to blind panic.

"Go ahead, Mr. Brandt." Ardath Bey was amused at his terror. "There—run into the tomb and hide. I give you my word I will not follow you." He chuckled. "I have already spent too much time there."

The suggestion was too much to resist. Josh bolted for the tomb. Once there, he reasoned, he could block the doorway with the table or with the lid of the coffin—with anything to keep the madman out.

But he was just barely inside when the air filled with green mist, glowing, swirling. It settled about Jim's body. Josh watched, horrified, as Jim's eye opened, and he sat up, then stood up.

"Josh," the living dead man said, "I'm cold."

From outside, Josh heard loud laughter, the almost hysterical laughter of Imhotep.

"I'm freezing, Josh."

Josh ran to the entrance and looked out. There was more of the green mist. It swirled more and more thickly around Imhotep until he was almost lost to sight. Then, a moment later, the mist cleared, and he was gone.

"Josh!" Jim had followed him to the tomb door. "Did you hear what I said? I'm freezing."

Josh looked at him, numb from everything he'd seen. "Jim, you're—you're—"

"Oh, God, I'm so cold."

"Come over by the fire. I'll find some more wood for it."

"God, Josh, help me. I'm so cold."

Josh took him by the hand and led him to the fire. "Here. Sit here a while."

Something was wrong. Ardath Bey—Imhotep—had been telling him something, something he hadn't grasped. He walked thirty yards about, picking all the bits of wood he could find, trying to understand what he had missed.

Just as he was adding the wood to the fire, it hit him. Involuntarily, he shouted, "Oh my God—Stephanie! He's going after her!"

CHAPTER 17

Pittsburgh was blanketed with heavy fog that night. And it was thicker in the northern suburbs, so dense that visibility was no more than ten feet. Twenty security guards lingered at their posts around the perimeter of the Brandt estate, four more were stationed at the entrances, and there was one outside the hospital wing. Most of them were bored, a few were cold, and all of them wished they were someplace else, earning better money.

Tom Bowers, the security chief, made rounds every hour, checking on the men, making certain they weren't actually nodding off, getting high, or otherwise ignoring their duties.

The gates were securely locked around the clock and only opened when Mrs. Brandt or one of the servants was going somewhere or returning, or when, rarely, she had a visitor. It seemed to Tom that anyone reasonable would have bristled at this kind of strict security, but she hardly seemed to have noticed. It wasn't explicitly a part of Tom's duties to keep from his men the fact that she was drunk all the time, but he felt honorbound to try and keep up appearances for his crew.

But there wasn't much point. She kept interacting with them, despite his best efforts to maintain some semblance of order. When she got too drunk or too lonely or too domineering, she would start to wander about the estate, seeking them out and hitting on them, at least the younger and better-looking ones. His problem was, some of them went with her. At least that night, he told himself, the fog was keeping her indoors.

At just past four in the morning, just as he was double-checking the chains on the front gate, his cell phone rang. It was Mr. Brandt.

"Tom?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've been trying to reach you for hours, but there's been something wrong, some interference with the satellite or something. How is everything there?"

"Just fine, sir. Crummy weather tonight. Really thick fog, the thickest I've ever seen. But other than that, everything's normal."

"Everyone on duty? Full compliment of men tonight?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I think something's going to happen."

It caught Tom off-guard. How could someone on the other side of the planet know that? "What do you mean, Mr. Brandt?"

"I can't really be any more specific than that. But you remember I've told you there was someone posing a threat to my family. I think he may try something sometime soon. Maybe tonight."

"I see."

"You'll have to warn all your people. Keep them especially alert tonight and for the next few nights."

"Absolutely, sir."

"Good." There was an awkward pause. "Have you checked on my sister tonight?"

"Not since midnight."

"Look in on her every hour or so, will you? I think she's the one who'll be . . ." He groped for the word he needed. " . . . targeted."

Tom frowned. Going into that isolated wing of the house, hearing the poor girl rant and cry in some crazy language, always creeped him out. "I'll check on her right now, sir."

"And you'll make sure you tell the foreman of the day crew all about this?"

"I'll give him the word, Mr. Brandt. Don't you worry."

"Oh—and, I don't seem to have the number for the nurse's office. Can you give it to me?"

Tom gave it.

"Good. I'll check back tomorrow during the day shift. And I'll probably call you tomorrow night, too."

"Sure thing."

"Thanks Tom. Please be extra vigilant. I'm really worried about this."

"Are you sure you can't tell me anything more about what's going on, sir?"

"There's no way I could explain it so it would make any sense. I'm in the middle of the Sahara Desert. And it would sound—well, never mind."

"I see." He didn't see at all, but it wouldn't be good for business to tell the boss he was being paranoid, if not out-and-out crazy.

"Have a good night, Tom. I'll check back when I can."

"Goodbye, Mr. Brandt."

He flipped his phone shut, tucked it into his pocket, and continued on his rounds. He'd go and check on the girl as soon as he made certain everyone was at his post. In the fog, he stumbled over a branch and nearly fell. "Damn!"

Just as he was leaving the gate and heading for the next station on his tour, he saw the oddest thing. The fog seemed actually to be getting thicker, and it seemed to be glowing faintly, as if someone in the distance had switched on a bank of lights. And winding slowly through the air was something else, something darker, as if a streamer of a glowing green mist had somehow materialized. It had to be a trick of the moonlight showing through the fog, somehow. He shrugged and headed up to the mansion.

The front door was open. The guard who should have been there was inside the foyer, lighting a cigarette.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just needed a smoke, Tom. I left the door open, see? I'll be stepping outside again, now."

"Don't do this again. There may be something happening tonight."

"Really? What?"

"I don't know. Just stay alert, that's all."

From farther inside the house, he could hear voices.

"Call me Claudia."

"Yes, Mrs. Brandt." It was the voice of another one of the guys, a part-timer, a college kid named Paul who worked three nights a week.

"No, call me Claudia."

"Yes, ma'am."

Tom knocked lightly at the parlor door and stepped inside without waiting to be asked.

Paul did a double-take. "Tom! Uh . . . Mrs. Brandt said she heard a noise. She wanted me to come inside and look around." He looked to Claudia, his eyes pleading with her to back him up.

"What kind of noise, Mrs. Brandt?" Tom didn't try to hide his skepticism.

She was even more drunk than usual; and she had her hand on Paul's forearm. "Just . . . just a noise. Why?"

"I'll have to check the house." He was scowling. Paul was a kid, but was he actually horny enough to have gone with her?

"You get back to your station, Paul. You're supposed to be at the garage, right?"

"Right. Sure thing." His face registered disappointment.

Yes, Tom would have given her what she wanted. Unhappily Paul left them and went back to his post.

Tom turned to go. But Claudia put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"I'm not calling anyone anything, Mrs. Brandt. I have to go check on your daughter, now. Excuse me."

As he was leaving her room, she stepped to the sideboard and poured herself another drink.

Tom walked slowly through the house. The place was so huge and so empty, his footsteps echoed.

At the nurse's station in the hospital wing, Nurse Cooney, the new hire, was reading a romance novel. Tom asked her if anything unusual had happened.

"No. Why?" She was annoyed at having her reading interrupted.

"Nothing. Mr. Brandt called me from Egypt a few minutes ago, that's all. He's worried."

"Oh."

"Is she awake?"

Nurse Cooney shrugged.

"Can I look in on her?"

She answered with another shrug and went back, pointedly, to her novel.

"Are you okay in here alone, Miss Cooney?" He gestured to the guard outside the window. "Should I have him come inside with you?"

"I'm fine." She wanted to read.

Tom walked the length of the corridor to Stephanie's room, stopped and pressed his ear to the door. She was talking—for a moment he let himself think she was talking *to* someone. He had never quite gotten used to her weird behavior, all the different voices, different people. This time, she was talking in that cryptic language of hers.

He was about to knock, unlock the door, and go in when, by chance, he glanced out a window.

There were more wisps of that strange green fog, winding through the air like a knot of snakes, glowing ever so faintly.

It must be the moon illuminating it. It *must* be. He decided that must mean the fog was thinning. With luck it would be gone soon.

Then, again through the door, he heard someone answer Stephanie. It was a man's voice, and it didn't sound like one of hers. But it sounded like it was talking that same odd language.

He knocked, then pulled the door open quickly. "Miss Brandt!"

She was in her bed, sitting up, propped against the pillows, quite naked. She looked even more pregnant than she had only that afternoon. And on one edge of the bed sat an old, wrinkled man in one of those Middle Eastern-style robes. He was holding her hand.

When Tom opened the door, the man got slowly to his feet. He was tall, thin, almost elegant in his cat-like movements. Stephanie glared at Tom and barked something in her made-up language. Then the man spoke to him in English, slowly, in a musical, sibilant voice.

"What do you want here?"

Tom couldn't believe he was hearing it. "I should be asking you that. Who are you, and how did you get in here?"

"That is no concern of yours."

The man raised his left hand and pointed at Tom, then began to mutter something is that same strange language of Stephanie's.

From out of the air, glowing green streamers of smoke materialized and spiraled around Tom. There were more and more of them. Panicked, he cried out, "Nurse Cooney! Call 911!"

A wave of overpowering cold took hold of him, and he fell dead on the spot.

The stranger stepped out into the corridor and raised his hand at Miss Cooney and muttered the same words. When

she, too, had fallen dead, he smiled and walked slowly, almost majestically, back to Stephanie's bedside.

A moment later, Tom's cell phone began to ring again. Too late.

Outside, in the ever-thickening fog, the security men lingered at their posts. All of them were bored; each of them dealt with it in his own way. Some listened to music or to talk radio. Some read, by the light of little book lights attached to their magazines and books. Some smoked dope or drank. The few of them who noticed the green smoke that snaked about the estate didn't pay it much attention.

Then the coils of glowing mist encircled them, and one by one they died and fell to the moist earth of the Brandt estate. And the unnatural mist evaporated, leaving only the natural fog.

There was noise in the hospital wing. Some kind of commotion. Those damned security men.

Claudia Brandt rang for the servants, forgetting that she had given them all the night off, with strict orders than any of them who remained in the house were not to bother her under any circumstances. If her plans for that handsome young guard went well, she wouldn't want them around.

She got unsteadily to her feet and put her drink on the floor. Then she lurched to the entrance of the passage that led from the main house to the wing and shouted, "Nurse Cooney!"

There was no answer. But she could hear something that sounded—not right.

"Nurse Cooney, I called you, damn it!"

Nothing. This kind of insolence was out of line; the nurse had to be talked to. Claudia headed for the wing.

When she saw Nurse Cooney lying dead beside her station, she stood and stared at the body for a long moment. She wasn't thinking clearly enough to know what to do. Besides, there was someone else in the wing: she could hear him. It was probably one of what she thought of as "her" security boys. She'd find him, and he'd handle this. His voice was coming from Stephanie's room.

The door to her room was ajar. A hand jutted out from it into the hallway; someone was lying on the floor. Claudia recognized the fabric of the shirt: that guard, that Tom Bowers, it had to be him. For the first time, through her alcoholic fog, she stopped and took the time to realize that things were not as they should have been.

Slowly, not knowing what to expect, she opened Stephanie's door.

Stephanie was there, completely naked, standing next to her bed. Beside her was a man, tall, thin, wearing one of those Egyptian-style robes—she couldn't remember what they were called—and stroking Stephanie's bulging stomach, slowly, lovingly, almost sensuously. She'd be going into labor any time now, Claudia realized; she'd never seen a woman look so pregnant.

"Who are you and what are you doing to my daughter?"

"I *am*," the man said in gentle, aristocratic tones, "taking her back to her homeland."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Hell?" He smiled at her. "No, hell is the province of the Great God Set."

"You're crazy."

But before she could say anything more, a swirling greenish mist enveloped Stephanie and the man. It grew thicker

and thicker, and when it cleared, they had vanished. Claudia realized she was alone in the room, with the corpse of her security chief.

The realization finally sobered her up just enough to realize what had happened, or what seemed to have happened, and she let out an ear-piercing scream. It reverberated through the empty corridors of her house and echoed back to her.

"Someone, come and help me!"

No one did. The servants were in their quarters, far enough away not to hear her. No one else was alive.

She dashed toward the nurse's station and pried the telephone from Nurse Cooney's fingers. She wasn't quite composed enough to call 911. Instead she hit the "0" for the operator and began to babble into the mouthpiece. "He took my daughter! He took my daughter! They disappeared together."

The operator tried to get her to calm down and explain clearly what had happened, but it was no use.

"He took my daughter! I told you so!" She screamed a series of insults, and the operator disconnected her.

Outside, the bodies of twenty security men lay where they had fallen. But more of Imhotep's mist appeared and enfolded them. One by one, they climbed to their feet and began to walk toward the house.

Claudia was finally beginning to get a grip on herself when the first of them burst through a window and lunged at her. Again she shrieked, and the dead guard tore the phone from her hands and pulled the cord from its socket.

An instant later a second one came, then a third, a fourth . . .

Claudia turned and tried to run, but the living dead had every way blocked but the one back to the end of the corridor and Stephanie's room. From there, Tom Bowers struggled to his feet and came purposefully toward her.

Twenty of them fell on her at once and tore her to pieces. Even dead, she reeked of alcohol.

The servants had heard her screams, finally. But they didn't much care. They were used to her drunken ranting, and they had long since learned to ignore it.

CHAPTER 18

Jim Huntingdon was cold with the chill of the grave.

It was high noon in the Sahara Desert; the temperature was over 90° and still climbing, and he could not stop shaking. Josh had gathered up all the brushwood in sight for the fire, but the last of it was gone, now, and the flames were dying. Jim sat huddled beside it, crying. "Josh, I want to die."

"You did."

"I want to die again."

Haroun had rejoined them after daybreak from wherever he had been hiding in the hills. He was calm and collected, impassive and seemingly oblivious to their plight. The only thing he had said all morning was, "The camels will go home to their stable. When they return without us, my cousin will realize there is something wrong, and people will come for us. We have provisions enough to wait."

He chose a spot at the entrance to Imhotep's temple and sat, watching the desert.

In a way, he was correct. They had food and water enough for three days, maybe four. Maybe longer than that, since Jim had shown no inclination to drink or eat.

But despite Haroun's assurances, Josh was in a borderline panic. Imhotep's words had been clear enough. He was the one who had made Stephanie pregnant; his—what would you call them? powers?—were the reason her pregnancy had advanced so rapidly. And he had plans for her and her child; that was obvious. But what? What could he want with her?

And Jim— He had been dead. Josh was sure of it, there could have been no mistaking it. Dead. Now, alive.

Imhotep—he could no longer think of the man as Ardath Bey—was—was—what? What could explain this? Josh's rational Western mind bristled at any suggestion of the supernatural, but there was no other explanation.

Imhotep—a god. A minor god, but an immortal nonetheless. Nothing else could explain all the . . . the thought was too bizarre, and he tried to push it out of his mind. Without success.

"Is there some emergency number we can call, Haroun? Just to be certain rescuers will come?"

"They will come, Mr. Brandt."

"But—but if we call—"

Haroun tuned him out. It was more and more clear to Josh that he, like Maqmir, was in league with Imhotep. Unwilling to sit and do nothing but wait, Josh had tried various numbers for directory assistance, emergency help, and so on. But the operators all spoke Arabic. And Haroun refused to talk to them.

"Your grandfather was here, as he said, wasn't he, Haroun? He assisted in bringing the mummy back to life. That is why Imhotep spared him."

"Help will come, Mr. Brandt. Be patient."

"How can I be patient—how can I *trust*—when my sister and her child are at risk?"

"Patience and trust are virtues, Mr. Brandt." Haroun sat, gazing into the timeless sea of sand, and said nothing more.

Finally Josh decided to call his office at Brandt Industries. First a secretary, then an executive assistant listened as he explained where he was and what was happening. Neither of them seemed quite to know what to make of it. Finally, they connected him to a vice president, and Josh repeated his story still again.

"And Mr. Huntingdon is there with you, sir?"

"Yes. As I said."

"He needs medical help?"

"Yes."

"Can you give me a precise location, sir?"

"No. I wish I could. We're at the edge of the Sahara, that's all."

"I'll make some phone calls. Someone over there—the police or the national government or someone—must have some idea where you are. I'll get help as soon as I can."

"Thanks. Thanks for trying."

He flipped his phone shut and put it in his pocket. Was there anyone else he could call? No one came to mind. Haroun was right; there was nothing to do but wait.

Hoping against hope, he tried the numbers at his estate again. No answer from security, and none from the nurse's station. None from his mother, but at least he comforted himself with the thought that he had expected none. After a few more tries, the battery in his phone went dead.

The afternoon grew even more insufferably hot for everyone but Jim, who still could not stop trembling with cold.

The sky was a vivid, transparent blue. There were no clouds, and the sun beat down without mercy. It was even more damnably hot than it had been the day before. Waves of heat rose from the sand, making the dead landscape look alive.

"I'm cold, Josh."

"I'm sorry, Jim. There's nothing else to burn."

"I'm cold."

Josh got down on a knee beside him and put an arm around him. "There. Does that help?"

"I can't feel anything."

"Oh."

"I'm cold, Josh."

There was no point trying to help. Jim was dead, or part of him was. Josh could burn his clothes, and maybe the bags they had their provisions in. That would make the fire last a little longer. But not long enough to make any real difference. If Jim hadn't felt the flames by now, how much difference would a few bits of burning cloth make?

Josh checked his watch. It was one o'clock. A pair of lizards scampered playfully though their camp. He wondered if they were mating, or if they were young animals acting like young animals, or if perhaps they were crazy with the heat. They were bright green with streaks of red and purple along their sides. They ran toward the spot where Haroun sat. He ignored them and, after a few minutes, they skittered away across the sand.

The glare of the sun on the sand was beginning to affect Josh's eyes. He hadn't had much sleep the night before. He needed darkness and rest. The tomb . . .

He took a flashlight, crossed the sand to the entrance, and went inside. It was much cooler there, and the only light came through the door; when he turned his back on it, his eyes stopped aching. The empty coffin of Imhotep was still propped against the wall, lid beside it. On an impulse, Josh tapped on it with a knuckle. The sound echoed softly through the tomb.

He had never bothered to examine the inner rooms. Switching on his flashlight, he went from one chamber to the next. Each was darker, but larger than the one before it. Gods, demons, marched along the walls. They faced forward, into eternity, not at Josh. Yet he thought he could feel them, laughing at him.

In the very last room was a huge alabaster sarcophagus. Empty, gaping. The smaller golden sarcophagus and the wooden coffin had once been inside it. This was the actual spot of Imhotep's burial.

He was too tired to think. After some rest, he'd be able to decide what to do. He went back to the entry chamber and sat down in a corner. Just above him was the image of the goddess Isis, the benevolent mother. He glanced up at it and laughed. After a few moments of resting in a corner, he stretched out on the stone floor and fell asleep.

There were dreams, dark, disturbing ones, but when he woke, every few minutes, he couldn't remember them at all.

When, finally, he shook off his sleep, it was dark outside. His watch read 11:30. He had slept hours longer than he'd intended.

Jim was still by the place where the fire had been, still huddled there. And he was naked. He had stripped off his own clothes and burned them. But the fire was dead.

Haroun was gone again. Josh decided it was no surprise. He got some beef jerky from one of the bags and ate.

Overhead, there were a million stars. And the bright, dying moon was climbing above the hills. It was nearly at its last quarter, and it was so bright it dazzled his eyes. As he watched, a large meteor shot across the sky just below it, then faded quickly from view.

Knowing it was useless, he called out, "Haroun?"

There was no answer.

But softly, just at the threshold of his hearing, there came a voice. And he thought he recognized it: It was Imhotep.

Alarmed, he looked around. It was coming from the temple; he was sure of it. Stopping to make certain Jim was okay, he crossed to the temple entrance.

From the innermost part of the structure came the voice of the demi-god. He was chanting. And there was light there, in the inner sanctum. He stepped inside and began to walk

toward the Holy of Holies, trying to make as little noise as he could.

Imhotep was praying, or intoning a psalm of some kind, in what Josh recognized as Stephanie's private language. The sound of his voice carried clearly. The light from the sanctum flickered; there must have been torches.

From behind him , outside the temple, Jim cried out, "Josh, I'm cold."

He kept walking. The temple was not large, hardly more than twenty yards long. But he made himself move slowly. This place was unknown and, he told himself, perhaps unknowable.

The fires burned brighter as he approached. He thought he could even feel their heat, emanating from the innermost chamber.

Imhotep was there, dressed in ceremonial robes in a style Josh had seen often enough in tombs and on old papyri. A pure white robe, and, draped over his shoulder, a leopard skin. Imhotep was dressed as a priest. Of the words he was chanting, Josh recognized only one: *Anubis*. It was repeated often.

Finally he was at the entrance, and there was no place where he could hide. He stepped into the room.

Haroun was there, waiting in attendance on his master.

A golden bed had been erected. Imhotep stood not far from it, holding an incense burner and praying his ancient prayer. On it, naked, lay Stephanie. From the way her body writhed, he knew she was in pain. Then he realized it was the pain of childbirth.

As in every Egyptian temple, a row of gods and goddesses processed along the walls, Osiris, Isis, Horus. One was a man with the head of a crocodile, another a lion-headed woman. A snake with human legs followed close behind an enormous scarab with bird's wings. The flickering light made them seem to move.

Her stomach contracted and she cried out.

"Steph!" He rushed to her side and took her hand.

Imhotep fell silent at once. Haroun made a move to stop Josh, to pull him away, but Imhotep gestured him away.

"Mr. Brandt." The voice was ancient; the patience in it, and in Imhotep's face, was equally so. "You are not going to be so foolish as to interfere with your sister's labor, are you?"

"I—I—no." He realized there was nothing he could do. "I—I only want to hold her hand."

Imhotep smiled. "Very proper. As her oldest living male relative . . ." Abruptly the smile disappeared. "But I warn you, do not attempt to intervene in what is happening here."

Josh ignored him and turned to his sister. In Egyptian, she mouthed a string of words, none of which made the least bit of sense to him except *Ankh-es-en-Amun*.

"Yes, Mr. Brandt. She is the embodiment of the princess I loved. But surely you already knew that."

Josh gasped. The situation was more and more incomprehensible to him. "You—you are the—"

"Yes." He said it softly, almost tenderly. "You are about to witness the birth of my son."

"Your son."

"And the birth of a great deal more. The gods are ready to reassert themselves. Egypt, my Egypt, the ancient place I architected for the gods, shall be great once again."

Stephanie cried out, an ear-piercing shriek, and her body wrenched free of Josh's hold.

"Now, Haroun!" Imhotep spoke imperiously.

Her water broke. Josh forced himself to look away. She cried out again.

A miniature whirlwind of green mist formed near the bed. Out of it stepped a small, deformed male dwarf. "Bes!" Imhotep chanted, "Great God of Childbirth, assist this woman, thy vessel! Assuage her pain and ease her labor!"

The dwarf leaped onto the birthing bed beside her and passed his arms over her three times.

When Josh looked back, there was something between her legs. The child. Haroun was there, partially blocking his view. Imhotep had not moved. The dwarf god Bes leaped into the air and vanished in a puff of mist.

From outside came Jim's voice. "Josh, please help me! I'm cold!"

Haroun took the infant and placed him gently in Stephanie's arms. And for the first time, Josh obtained a clear look at it.

All he could see was its back. And it was not human. It was a bird of prey, a hawk or a falcon, two feet long. Its feathers were still moist with the waters of the womb. The sight of it made Josh sick to his stomach.

But then the infant moved, and he could see that on its bird's body was the head of a human child, a newborn. It looked directly at him with large, curious eyes, and it cried.

Haroun placed it at Stephanie's breast, and she suckled it.

This was beyond anything Josh had imagined, or feared. This was—this was—he didn't know words for it. But he had to do something, to protect his sister, himself, his world from this . . . thing.

He made a quick lunge for the bed, trying to grasp the monster. He could kill it, strangle the life out of it. It would be a kind of murder, but this thing could not live. Haroun stopped him and threw him against the wall.

Again he lunged, trying frantically to get hold of the unnatural creature his sister had birthed.

This time it was Imhotep who stopped him. He raised an arm, chanted some ancient words, and Josh flew across the room, slamming violently into the opposite wall. It was no good; there was no way he could fight both of them, even if

Imhotep had not had such power.

He slid down onto the stone temple floor. Then, not knowing what else to do, he looked up to the row of gods on the wall above him. They were real, that much he had learned, that much he understood. Not knowing whether to feel foolish, he began to pray.

"Isis, benevolent mother, protect us. This fiend, Imhotep, has all but destroyed my family. Save us from him now. Do not let him do the horrible thing he plans to do. We are all your children, O Isis. Have mercy on us."

The foundations of the temple began to quake. Imhotep raised his hand and began to intone still again, but a blinding flash of light filled the sanctum. When Josh looked up again, the image of the goddess was glowing a pure, brilliant white.

Bolts of fire shot from her hands and struck Imhotep. Crying out, he fell against the wall, then to the floor. The goddess glowed brighter and brighter, till Josh had to cover his eyes.

The temple was still shaking, more and more violently. Blindly, one hand covering his face, Josh groped his way to the entrance.

When he was in the next, outer room, he stood and looked back.

"Do not look, mortal!" called a woman's voice. "Do not look, or you will suffer as he does."

Josh ran madly for the front entrance to the temple. Just as he reached it, there was one more violent quake, and the temple collapsed behind him.

Almost at once, everything was quiet. The temple had crumbled to a pile of stone. Dust hovered in the air and settled slowly. There was no sign of anything moving in the debris.

Jim was curled on the ground by the dead fire. He looked up at Josh and whimpered, "I'm cold, Josh. I'm so cold."

Josh got down beside him and put his arms around him and said, "So am I, Jim."

"Hold me. Make me be warm again."

"I'll try."

"Make me warm."

Josh held him, very tightly, and whispered another prayer to the goddess. But this time, no answer came. His voice became lost in the cold desert night.

The next morning, the sun began to warm Josh as soon as it appeared. But not even the god Amun-Ra, it seemed, had the power to warm Jim.

Josh prayed.

Then, just as the first rays of the sun touched the remains of the temple, something moved there. First one stone shifted, then another.

Imhotep was alive. It couldn't be anything else. Josh jumped to his feet. "Come on, Jim, we have to hide."

"Just let me die."

"Come on."

But as he was pulling Jim to his feet, something finally emerged from the ruin.

And it was the child, the human-headed bird. It scrambled awkwardly to the top of a fallen column, perched there unsteadily, and looked at the world with the eyes of the newborn creature it was. When it saw Josh, it opened its mouth and cried out to him; and its voice was the voice of a human baby. The sun's warmth was drying its feathers quickly.

It should have died. Josh told himself that. It should have died with its parents when the temple fell. It would have to die now.

He picked up the largest stone he could find and walked toward the child. It was still weak; he could see that. It would not be hard to crush its skull.

For a long moment, the bird-thing watched him curiously, not knowing what to expect. Then something in his manner or his body language made it alarmed. It screeched like a bird, not a human child. And it spread its wings, flapped them uncertainly a few times, then lifted into the air.

It circled Josh a few times, just out of arm's reach. Then it flew off rapidly and disappeared into the face of the hot desert sun.

Two days later rescuers arrived. They had been sent by Brandt Industries Middle Eastern Division. They found the two men, Josh and Jim, huddled inside Imhotep's tomb, arms around one another, clinging madly, desperately to one another as if there was nothing else in the world.

Jim kept telling them he was cold. "Will you please find a way to warm me, gentlemen?" They dressed him in warm clothes, but it didn't do a thing to comfort him.

When they tried to talk to Josh, all he could do was babble at them, in a strange language none of them recognized.